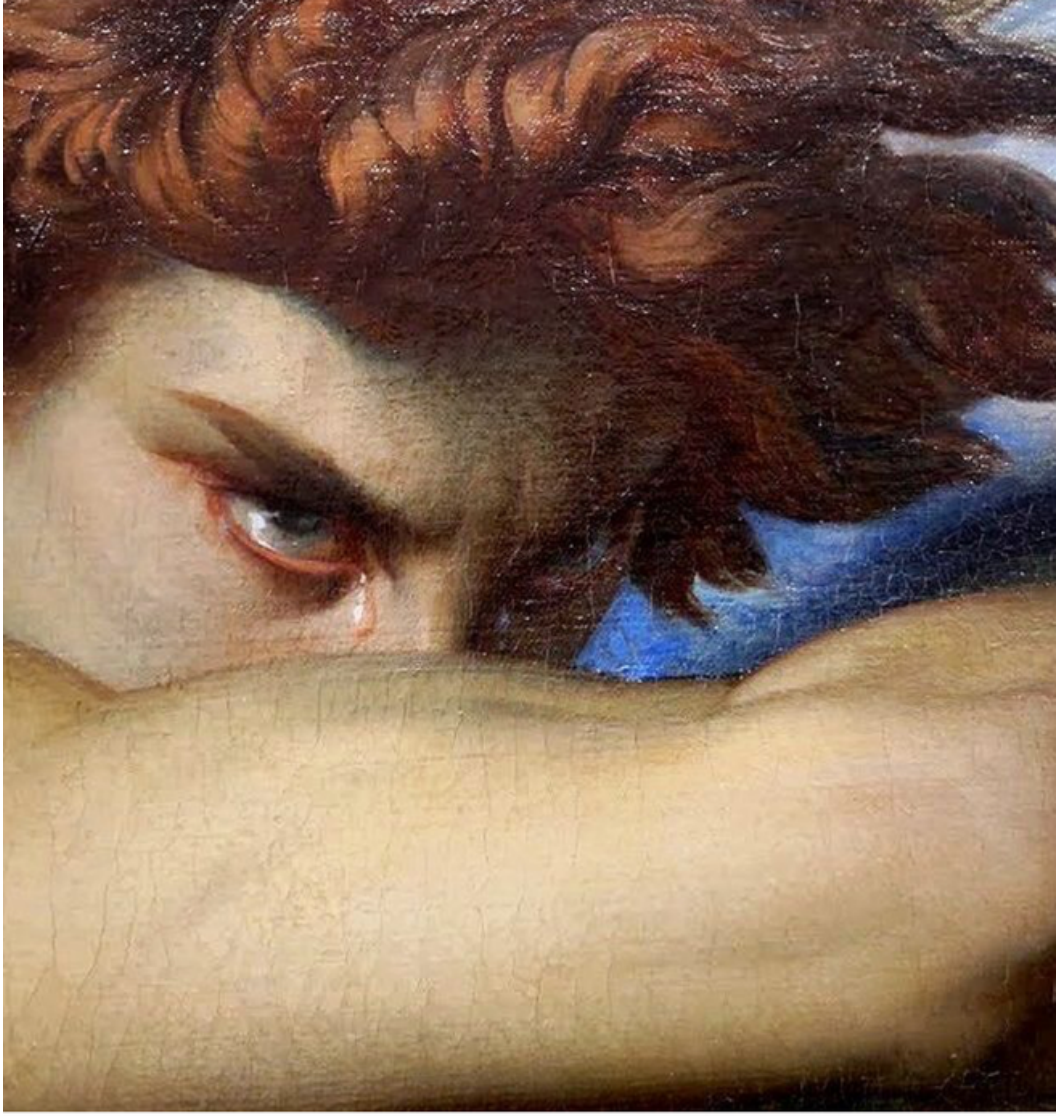

PENGUIN CLASSICS

DASOBIQUIET

The Dangers of Foresight

The Dangers of Foresight

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The Dangers of Foresight

by DAsObiQuiet

Summary

Anakin was a Jedi once. He was also a 45-year-old Sith Lord. Now, with all of those memories crammed into his head, he's 9-years-old again and back at the Temple on Coruscant, bound and determined to change destiny. If he can, you know, stop Dooku from joining Sidious, free his mother, start a personal war against slavery, avoid Palpatine, and train to even a fraction of his previous (future?) levels, all while maintaining his cover as a 9-year-old initiate. It can get rather...overwhelming. Too bad keeping up a facade has never been one of his strong points.

Notes

Please note, this is a sequel to a story called Hindsight is not Perfect. I've been told that the story can stand on its own, but it will probably make more sense if you read the other one first. If you would like to look that up, it is under my works.

- Translation into Deutsch available: [Restricted Work] by Lady_of_Dare

Prologue

32 BBY

As far as Anakin Skywalker knew, the Jedi Temple had three cafeterias. The largest remained open for all hours to serve Jedi Padawans, Knights and Masters that didn't have time to cook in their own private quarters. The smallest was rarely open, reserved for special occasions, such as visiting senators or the rare Council dinner. Anakin could remember using both during his previous experience as a Jedi. The third area had scheduled hours of operation as it had been built for the initiates and creche children. As such, he had only seen the third cafeteria, but had never actually used it.

Until now.

And as far as he was concerned, the pleasure could have been indefinitely postponed. He'd decided almost immediately that he didn't care for it. The various robots and creche teachers would watch the childrens' nutrient intake like a Hut watched their bank accounts. When one child wasn't eating up to standard, he would be *strongly encouraged* to add something to the plate, or to not take as much.

Still, Anakin couldn't quite bring himself to complain about the entire experience...especially the food. After all, anything was better than being force-fed through tubes and wires in a special chamber created specifically for him. Suppressing a mild shudder and pushing those memories to the side, Anakin took another sip of his pleasantly tangy drink and glanced around the large room.

It had a typical 'Jedi' feel to it, albeit slightly more colorful. The somewhat brighter decorations came in the form of encouraging wall-hangings and signs that Anakin hadn't ever seen elsewhere in the Temple. However, the base colors of the walls and carpets consisted of neutral creams, browns and grays that most Jedi rooms sported.

The children themselves moved in slow, lazy patterns that gave off a sense of peace and confidence no adult could ever truly possess. It was an atmosphere of naivete, and Anakin found he actually enjoyed that one facet of his recently established Jedi lifestyle despite himself, even if the classes were...difficult to endure in just about every other aspect.

Learning with children from the creshe had been trying for Anakin the first time. Between the condescending teachers, jealous or awe-struck

peers and being either incredibly behind or extremely advanced in just about every subject, it was a wonder he'd passed any classes at all. Now, with his superior knowledge in every single subject, the whole situation tended to border on infuriating.

And he didn't have Obi-wan to support him this time around. As a matter of fact, Anakin rarely saw the knight as he was often gone on missions like any normal Jedi. The only person who could give Anakin any backing at all happened to be a little green troll that was far too busy to actually help more than occasionally.

Not that he needed that support. After all, they were just a bunch of children that he could best at practically anything with the exception of stupidity. He would not let them intimidate him. He would not!

Yet, as he sat during their shared free hour at lunch at the lone table he'd chosen, he couldn't help but think that his life at the Temple was fated to always be miserably boring when it wasn't utterly maddening. He hadn't expected much different, but he'd truly forgotten how cruel and exclusive children could be without even realizing it. For a second time in his life, he'd been completely ostracized. And why not? The other children had long since formed their cliques and groups, and because of their reclusive upbringing, they were not accustomed to letting newcomers in.

Actually, the only other high point of his placement was the fact that he didn't seem to have any classes with...a few sentients his own age that he really wasn't ready to deal with yet. He knew he'd have to face Ferus and...the others, but he really wasn't sure how to handle them. Part of him wanted to forget they ever existed, but at the same time, he knew they could be very handy in a hard situation and he knew he needed allies still. He'd have to choose whether he would allow them into his life this time around, and he appreciated that it was his choice to make, but he'd decided to put it off for now. He had the time to be patient after all and rushing into a decision with so much baggage attached...well, he wanted to know he could handle the decision, whatever he chose.

Absently, he stuck a slice of a random sweet but slightly spicy fruit he didn't know the name of into his mouth and couldn't help a small smile. He would never take the ability to taste anything for granted again.

He opened his eyes and resumed his study of his current fellow classmates. No one watched him, no one looked at him, and no one

seemed to care that he was there. Oh, that had not been the case for the first few days, but unlike his previous lifetime, it hadn't lasted. Now he seemed to be more invisible than anything.

Normally, he hated being invisible and even now it irked him somewhat. But, if he were to be perfectly honest with himself, he would have to admit that he did not feel as unaccepted as he had in his previous life. Whether that was due to his own maturity, his lack of attachment to the 'Sith Killer' (as some of them had called Obi-wan), or the fact that no one seemed to know of his background this time, he couldn't tell. Truthfully, he didn't much care to find out. It was amusing enough at the moment to watch the groups from afar—which wasn't exactly a new circumstance for him. Anakin had always felt like an outcast of some sort. Besides, with his knowledge of strategy, mechanics and even advanced lightsaber theory, he doubted it would last.

He was almost surprised that rumors hadn't already begun to circulate. He didn't trust the Council to keep his supposed Dark Side training or his title of 'The Chosen One' secret for long. There were always leaks, but it hadn't happened yet, and he found that he could actually enjoy anonymity for a little while. For once, he found he was happy enough to be patient and wait.

That thought amused him. Obi-wan...well, his Obi-wan from his timeline, would have probably had a heart attack at Anakin choosing to be patient over something like this. In his previous life, he would have done everything he could to not be invisible. Any attention was better than no attention. As an adult, he realized that that was just how a former slave would think...and that was exactly why he had decided not to do anything openly rash or drastic this time around if he could help it.

Despite being mostly content though, his decision annoyed him enough to be a bother. It boiled down to the fact that he just wasn't a man of thought. He was, and always had been, a man of action. Then again, maybe that had been his biggest problem.

Finished with his lunch, he gathered his things and put the plates together, heading for the drop off area. A few children noticed him as he passed, either glancing, nonchalantly casual, or sending him a small smile or a scowl. Strangely enough, the latter were few and far between. He only barely remembered half of the initiates names. Most of them had been killed in the clone wars before he'd turned, so thankfully he didn't have that kind of baggage on his conscience. In

return to their cursory glances he would simply nod politely back and move on.

As he meandered through the room, he couldn't help but eavesdrop on their conversations. He found them interesting to overhear simply because they all seemed so whimsical. The girls would talk about the different knights or their idols and their latest exploits as much as the boys did, but the conversations seemed fundamentally different. The boys would get excited and insistent, while the girls would usually use a quieter argument as to who was best. Sometimes he would catch snippets of different class assignments while other times, he would find people quietly discussing homework. Every now and then, he'd even overhear different groups arguing over the recent interactive games and other such things of equal importance. He liked overhearing those the best. It entertained him to think of all the stalwart Jedi he used to know discussing computerized games and holo vids as children. The Chreche children weren't allowed much in the way of media, but they tended to obsess over what they did have.

One particular conversation caught his ears as he passed one of the tables closest to the dish drop-off.

"I can't believe he actually left," a girl with long, dark hair whispered to a boy with dark blue skin that shimmered in the light. Anakin couldn't place the species, strangely enough. That had happened quite a bit recently. He knew he didn't know all of the species in the universe, but he would have thought he'd have at least a good chunk down-

"Why would Master Dooku leave?" the boy whispered back. Anakin froze, eyes widening. The next moment he'd rushed up to the table with the two initiates, his dishes clattering onto the table between their plates.

"What did you say?" he asked, uncaring that his voice had turned harsh. Startled, the two jumped. For a moment he wanted to scoff at their lack of training, but the moment passed quickly as he needed to make sure he'd heard correctly.

The girl and boy exchanged glances before the boy looked up with blue, slitted eyes. "I-it's been all around the Temple. Master Dooku left the order about a week ago. There are rumors that he'll be added to the list of 19."

For a moment, all Anakin could do was stare at the two not-yet-Jedi.

Then he nodded to them. "Thank you," he muttered politely and started walking back towards his previous destination with one thought on his mind: For the first time in his life, he'd waited too long. Well, he'd have to rectify that.

He didn't remember the cleaning droid taking his dishes, nor did he really remember those initiates at the table staring after him as he left. He only vaguely recalled sprinting down the hall and up a flight of stairs. Entering the Jedi Library, it wasn't difficult to gain access to one of the computers stationed there, and he sat down quietly. For now, he needed information.

He typed "Dooku" into the computer and waited for the results to come up on the holographic screen.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three galactic standard months later

Anakin smiled as he stepped onto the air taxi in civilian clothing, positive that his temporary escape from the temple would not be discovered. He took a moment to shake his head sadly at how much easier it was to slip past the robots and other supposedly air-tight security measures than it had been to trick Obi-wan when he'd forgotten to lock the door at night.

He couldn't help but feel a little grateful for (and more than a little smug at his circumvention of) the conditions at the Temple now. He needed to do this without interference...and Obi-wan would have definitely interfered. Any other master probably would have as well, for that matter—which was exactly why his not being taken by a master had turned out to be such a positive development. Besides, it gave him more options. He didn't have to sneak out in the middle of the night this time around. If he were lucky, he could get away quite easily in the early evening.

The taxi ride was short, and half of a galactic standard hour later, he slipped into a public, intergalactic Comm unit booth. This would be expensive, but hopefully worth it. It irked him to no end that he had to tap into the savings he'd begun for his mother's release, but in the end decided that he'd just have to work harder to make up the difference.

The Jedi didn't give an allowance to the children as it encouraged selfishness and greed (Anakin rolled his eyes at that thought; he had his own opinions on such matters). Padawans, Knights and Masters didn't get any money on a regular basis either. Instead, the Jedi had several large accounts set up with different financial circuits across the Republic that someone on a mission could tap into if necessary. The council also encouraged Jedi to take some credits with them before they left the temple so they could be prepared. Those types of transactions tended to be handled by Knights and Masters, so Anakin wouldn't have any access to anything other than what he could acquire outside of the temple's knowledge.

Fortunately, it hadn't been difficult to hook up with some of his old racing circuits. After a few demonstrations, he'd been able to get a sponsor and then had begun collecting a nice little nest egg of winnings. He even had a loose budget worked out now and different accounts that he split the money between. The whole idea of being somewhat responsible with the credits he earned was something rather new, but he had to plan it out if he wanted enough money to free his mother and fund his personal crusade. Sneaking out to race on a regular basis wasn't so new...at least, not to him. He'd just started his 'delinquency' a little earlier this time, albeit for completely different reasons.

After a few small modifications to the Comm unit, he returned to the holographic interface and put his bank number and other personal information (all false) into the system. After a few seconds, the approval signature came through and Anakin punched in the Comm number.

Finding the private frequency had not been easy. Still he was more than a little frustrated that it had taken him as long as it had to obtain it. Without any of his real contacts set up, he'd had to crack several of the Jedi Temple's security systems without letting anyone know. And that had been the real trick. Anakin's strengths lay in hardware more than software, especially after years and years of telling the peons to do the grunt work while he had top-level access.

Truthfully, he just hoped that he wasn't too late.

The droid-like voice that had previously asked him for his information spoke up again. "Comm line verified. Would you like to place this call?" A 'yes' and 'no' popped up on the holographic screen in front of him. He reached for the 'yes', but his hand paused over the word. Not for the first time, he questioned whether he should be doing this at all. He hadn't been able to fix anything big enough to change the future yet, and honestly, he wasn't even sure he could. But if he couldn't, there certainly wasn't anyone else who could. So far, he'd only been able to bring about small, positive changes; minuscule events that wouldn't mean anything in the long run. His trying to meddle in more dire affairs had only resulted in something similar to or worse than the previous time-line. Events such as Qui-gon dying and almost getting Padme killed.

If he went through with this, he wasn't sure he could account for even half of the possible, extremely undesirable repercussions. This could let Palpatine know far too much, far too soon...and he needed to avoid

that at all costs. His lightsaber skills had come a long way from his previous state of weakness when he'd first come back in time, but he wouldn't put himself up against a senior padawan yet, let alone a Sith Master. No, he was not ready and wouldn't be for a while.

Still, if he could accomplish this one task, it could throw all of Sidious' plans back for months, if not years. That, and he might have another ally. For about the hundredth time, he came to the same conclusion; the possible positive results outweighed the negative ones, if only barely.

His finger hit the holographic "yes" and the call began to ring through. He always had been a risk taker anyway.

Before the other line could pick up, Anakin did one final thing; he slipped on a mask. It wasn't anything overly dramatic, just a straight, white, blank mask with two eyes cut out and nothing else. He needed to hide his identity if he were to pull this off, for several reasons. First, why would Dooku listen to a Temple initiate? Why *should* he? Second, Anakin wasn't sure of the Count's current alliance: light, dark or gray. If Dooku had already spoken to and made an alliance with Sidious, then Anakin would have to rely on his skills and knowledge of the underground (as well of the second change of clothes he wore underneath his current attire) to get him back to the temple untraced and alive.

"Your call has been accepted," the voice said, just as Anakin finished arranging the hood of the tunic he was wearing.

The voice that came over the other line sounded rather amused, and slightly intrigued. "Count Dooku of Serenno, speaking."

xXx

Growing up in the Jedi Temple had, unsurprisingly, taught Dooku many things. First and foremost was that nothing was really as it seemed. Only slightly less important to him was the fact that patience got you everywhere, so he'd cultivated his to a point where he could outlast just about anyone on any subject. Or so he'd thought. His current project was trying his supposedly bottomless patience immensely, and he'd only been really searching for a little over a galactic standard month.

It had been nothing short of horrendously difficult to continually track down clues to the whereabouts of the Sith Lord that the former Viceroy of the Trade Federation had informed him of. Despite his

contacts and diligence, he still had almost nothing to go on. He also had a suspicious feeling that what little he did have was leading him somewhere specifically. He hated being manipulated, but if that was the only way to uncover the truth, than so be it. If the Jedi would not address this problem, then he would.

That was, after all, why he had decided to leave the Order.

Regaining his planetary title had been only a small matter, as his family, country and world had welcomed him back with open arms. Now he had the power, money, influence and will to do something about this new threat, and he had vowed that he would indeed do what he could. His first goal would be to track the Sith down. Then he would either use his diplomatic or combative skills (probably both knowing his luck) to address the situation.

Today, like most days, he had uncovered almost nothing and had yet to hear from his current contacts, and had just begun to go over the information again (for the umpteenth time) when he received the private call on his personal Comm link. That in and of itself was unusual. Those who knew the number shouldn't appear as 'private' on his Comm unit, and anyone who did have a private number shouldn't know the frequency. Frowning, he opened the comm's holographic screen, reading the message that came with the connection request. Then his eyes widened.

I know who the Sith Lord is.

Well, wasn't that convenient.

Dooku didn't believe in coincidences. So, someone, somewhere had gotten wind of his little search. They would have to be extremely resourceful and either very brave, or very stupid to be digging through a Jedi Master's (former or not) private business uninvited. Probably a little of both. One didn't cross either royalty or a trained Force-sensitive lightly. Of course, this lucky break could easily be something that had been deliberately placed in his path by the Sith to either lead him directly into a trap, or mislead him completely. That last option sounded the most likely, but either way he would have to tread with caution.

A small smile formed on his face. This would be interesting.

Setting his data pad down, he reached over and flipped on the switch. "Count Dooku of Sorreno speaking." To his surprise, the face that appeared wasn't a face at all. It was a mask; a white, blank, curved

surface under a hood and dark slots that didn't reveal any hint to the person's eyes at all. So, this supposed informant did not wish to reveal his identity. Also interesting.

"I have secured the signal on my end." The voice came across enhanced and distorted by some mechanical adjustment, but the sheer authority in those words surprised him. He could not tell much just by the shape or size of the head (he couldn't even see where the shoulders ended), and nothing else seemed to have the potential of giving anything about the person behind the fuzzy holographic image away. He appeared as a holographic bust, with no background or other definable features. This being had thought the encounter out well—professionally even. Could he be a bounty hunter, perhaps? Or a Sith himself? Dooku found himself impressed, if wary, and he stroked his beard thoughtfully, keeping his anticipation firmly in check. It only took him a few seconds to secure his own end of the call.

"With whom am I speaking?" he asked cautiously.

"You may call me Luke," the voice replied, the superiority still quite evident. So, this person was used to discussing subjects with powerful people and did not let himself be daunted by them. Possibly he dealt with such people on a somewhat regular basis? Or the being thought of himself as Dooku's equal, perhaps. He filed the information away for later.

Dooku nodded politely. "Very well, Luke. It seems you have some information I have been seeking."

"I do."

"I see. Who is this person I have been searching for?"

A slight hesitation. "What will you do with the information?"

Blunt, but a good question none the less. "I plan on turning such information over to the proper authorities."

"The 'proper authorities' being whom?"

The Count frowned slightly. "That would depend on this person's true identity. I plan on going to the Senate if necessary."

A thoughtful pause met his words. The former Jedi watched for a moment, looking at what little he could of the body language and analyzing the tone of voice that had still come across despite the

enhancements. "What would the Senate be able to do about a Sith Master?"

Dooku's frown deepened. "They would have the authority to bring the Jedi in on such matters." And encourage the Jedi to actually *do* something about it.

"Why not simply go to the Jedi?"

His frown vanished almost instantly, replaced with a minute smile. What an incredibly Jedi-like thing to say. Of course, that had been part of the reason why Dooku had left, the idea that Jedi (and thus by default, Sith) were above answering to anyone else, but still. Was this 'Luke' an old ally from the temple? He had to admit, he felt a great deal of relief at the idea of someone else in the Jedi Order realizing what he himself had been trying to say. It seemed he still had some friends besides Sifo-dyas in the Order. Unless this 'Luke' was indeed Sifo (although he doubted it). Whoever it was, they obviously valued their anonymity, not that Dooku blamed them. He made a mental list of Jedi Masters who might be inclined enough to agree with him to go behind the other Jedi's backs to help him.

"I have brought my concerns to the Jedi Council. I would need a good deal of proof before they would consider moving against anyone who may be the Sith Master. This proof they require is rather...difficult to come by. Truthfully, I am curious as to whether your own information is credible. How did you come by this knowledge?" He would also like to know how his anonymous friend had found this information when he hadn't been able to even catch a glimpse of it.

The pause from the figure was nothing if not pronounced and somewhat reluctant, Dooku noted curiously. "I know this, because I used to be his apprentice."

Any amusement he'd been displaying vanished immediately, replaced by shock and surprise. Surely this could not be an acquaintance of his! None of the Jedi he'd been considering had any inclination towards dark teachings. Besides, as far as he knew, the Sith only had one apprentice, and that apprentice had died on Naboo, killed by Obi-wan Kenobi, padawan to Qui-gon Jinn, Dooku's own former apprentice.

After several seconds, he managed to speak again, keeping his voice calm. "How is it that you live then?"

The figure shook its head. "Do you honestly believe the Sith Order lives solely by the rule of two? The only real rule they bother

following is that Sith ensure their superiority through any means necessary." He paused, then muttered under his breath, "They are just as blind and corrupt as the Jedi."

Dooku couldn't help his surprise at the baited phrase. The Sith were *supposed* to be corrupt. He'd always taken that as a given...just like every Jedi had. But from the way this mysterious Sith apprentice spoke...was he suggesting that the current Sith path itself had twisted from its original direction? As if the corruption had been corrupted. As if this being before him had been somehow drawn into becoming a Sith and then been disillusioned at how far that path had fallen from the ideal he'd expected. The very thought was...mind-boggling, to say the least.

And yet he seemed just as disenchanted by the Jedi teachings. The being obviously knew Dooku had been at odds with the Jedi Council. Dooku could tell simply from the way Luke had stated it—as if he'd not just expected an acquiescence but almost took for granted the fact that the Count would agree with him. And he did. The Jedi had indeed strayed from their original goal. The statement had been the being's way of affirming that they both shared at least a similar point of view in that regard—although this brought up the question of whether Luke had any familiarity with the Jedi beyond the biased teachings of his supposed former master. The problem was, he still had many people he cared for in the Jedi Order and the idea of anyone, even a half-trained Sith, anywhere near the Temple did not sit well with him. He made a show of stroking his beard thoughtfully again, some fears at least temporarily quelled while others flared up higher than ever.

Still, he had always believed that discretion was the better part of valor, so he chose to ignore the sentence for now. This was, after all, no time to become involved in a philosophical argument. "So you were being trained to replace the other apprentice? Or perhaps along side him?"

"Something to that effect."

Dooku frowned at the vague answer. "Or were you being trained by the one killed on Naboo?"

When the being spoke again, he could easily hear the barely concealed contempt behind their speech. "That...*being* did not have the capacity to even begin to train an apprentice." And a touch of rage if Dooku could read the other's tone correctly. Not that he would expect

differently from a Sith Apprentice.

"I did not mean to offend," Dooku said lightly. "It was a reasonable question."

"Indeed," the figure responded grudgingly. "Both the Sith on the planet and myself were trained by the same master."

"I see," The Count replied, leaning forward. "If I may be so bold, you have implied that you are no longer a Sith Apprentice. I was under the assumption that once chosen, one would have that...profession for life."

The being was silent for almost a full minute. "A...good friend never believed I'd fully turned, despite the evidence against such an opinion. He confronted me at the risk of his own life. It made me see the universe a little more clearly. Then I died."

"An excellent solution," Dooku nodded in approval of the being's answer to the problem. Falsifying one's death would obviously be risky, but a valid resolution none the less. Still, he had his doubts about the being's sincerity. "And what proof can you offer that you speak the truth?"

The figure paused for several moments, then seemed to throw all caution to the wind. "You are correct. I have no proof that I am not affiliated with Sidious."

Dooku raised an eyebrow. That name had been dropped purposefully, offered as proof that the being did at last know of the Sith. Clever. He could still easily be acting under orders, but one way or another, he knew something, and Dooku intended to find out what.

"Very well, I will take your words into consideration."

The being nodded slightly, acknowledging the statement. "You will not regret it. Now, before we arrange a meeting, I believe it is only fair that I know what your general goals in finding the Sith are."

The Count frowned. He'd already told Luke what he planned on doing with the information, but somehow he felt this question was deeper...more personal. Truthfully, though, Dooku had been trying to figure out his own stance on the Sith. Now, faced with the question, he had to ask himself exactly what his goals were. What if they didn't have the proof for the Senate or the Jedi? He believed this being, but somehow doubted that he would testify before the courts or the Jedi if

he valued his anonymity that much, but his testimony would be vital in convincing those people in power to act. If he could not convince Luke to testify, he knew he wouldn't just let it go. The Council never acted, and that had been one of the larger reasons as to why he'd left the Order. It stood to reason that once he found his target, he would probably end up fighting or confronting him in some way. Was he ready for that? He didn't know, and truthfully the Count would rather avoid that. He had figured that he would decide on a course of action once he'd discovered the Sith's identity, perhaps even spoken with him, but now he realized that he would need a stronger plan before he acted.

Part of him thought that somehow tracing and bringing down the Sith would be helpful and useful to the Galaxy as a whole. In some small corner of his mind, though, he could not help but think that perhaps the Jedi were doomed to fall beneath the shadow of the Sith. It grew like a cancer, no matter how many times he pushed that thought away. It had taken root after being confronted by the corruption in the Order and even now it reached forth to whisper that perhaps he was fighting on the wrong side.

Contemplating these thoughts, he sat back in his chair as he took another look at the blank mask, wondering what exactly Luke knew. He'd already expressed his dislike for both the Sith and the Jedi, which put the two of them on similar ground, but Dooku knew so little about this person...he would have to tread cautiously.

"I had not yet decided on a course of action if I cannot find the proof to the Senate's or the Jedi's liking," he finally said, slowly.

The figure seemed to consider that. "You left the Jedi because you considered their teachings corrupt, did you not?" the figure asked quietly.

Dooku raised an eyebrow. He hadn't spoken of that to very many people either. The figure was indeed a conundrum. Apparently his silence and minute expression was all Luke needed. "I will admit that I too once had questions about the Jedi teachings, and I agree that they are corrupt to an extent."

"But..." the Count encouraged, curious as to where the discussion was going. The further the conversation continued, the more intrigued Dooku became.

"But have you considered that the Sith teachings are just as imperfect

and twisted from their original course in their own way?"

Dooku felt his brow furrow, not so much from the thought (the idea still seemed so far-fetched and yet plausible to him), but more at the implications. He could never see himself actually changing his opinion to match the Sith ways, no matter what his previous contemplations had concluded. Was this being suggesting... And how could he know?

Regaining his composure, he decided to avoid said implications and ask his earlier question.l "Aren't Sith teachings supposed to be corrupt?"

The being considered that. "Not originally, no."

The former Jedi frowned outright. "Explain."

"I will do so and give you information about the Sith Lord you seek, but only with two conditions."

Dooku's frown deepened but he managed to hide most of the frustration he felt. Why couldn't they simply discuss this over the channel?

"Very well," he finally conceded. He didn't have any leverage to keep his contact talking otherwise.

"First, I will not explain anything more over a Comm transmission."

The Count frowned again. "The channel is secure."

The figure shook its head, the smallest movement but a great deal of meaning behind it. "I do not believe in a completely secure channel."

Dooku's frustration grew. "What do you propose then? A physical meeting?"

The contact nodded. "That would be acceptable."

The Count nodded. It was an understandable, if somewhat risky request. "I will meet you here, in my home in two weeks time."

The figure shook its head again. "I cannot."

"Surely you don't expect me to come to you?" This could still easily be a trap and both of them knew it.

"My current...occupation will not allow my absence." Stuck between a

comet and an asteroid then. "I propose a compromise. There is a diner on Coruscant." Dooku raised an eyebrow. So the being was likely on Coruscant and force sensitive if he'd been trained as a Sith. How had the Jedi not noticed him? Could he hide his presence that well? Had he somehow infiltrated the Jedi, even? He'd assumed that Luke was a Jedi-turned-Sith, but could it be the other way around? He'd never heard of such a thing... The being continued. "I will send you the coordinates. It is a public place, one you may be familiar with yourself."

The coordinates flashed across the screen and Dooku's eyes widened again. Didi's Cafe*? The one his padawan had been so fond of? A sudden uneasiness began to uncurl in his gut. Just how much information about him had Luke gathered? This being seemed to know and understand the reasons why Dooku had left the Jedi Order and knew several personal details, but only to a certain extent. It wasn't consistent, almost as if he'd only known or heard everything about one particular portion of Dooku's history and jumped to conclusions. Admittedly they were mostly correct conclusions, but still...

"Meet me there in two weeks time," Luke continued. "And come alone. You may specify the time, but send it directly, do not speak it." Dooku nodded, eying the figure again. He seemed terribly paranoid. Not that the Count would expect differently from a former Sith apprentice. After considering his options, he sent his specified hour and received a confirmation from the other.

"And the other condition?"

"Do not speak with anyone on or from Coruscant until you come, and when you come speak only to me. Also, do not accept any Comm signal you are not familiar with. I am not the only one who knows of your search."

"What would you have me tell anyone who calls me?" Dooku asked slowly. Sypho Dias still spoke to him on a regular basis, as did many of his former acquaintances from the Senate. Besides, if he received another unknown number, then it could very well be someone more (or less, as the case may be) informative and/or trustworthy than whomever Luke wanted him to avoid.

"Have someone tell them you are unreachable; a personal journey to reassess your current beliefs or something along those lines. It would be reasonable considering your recent...change of occupation. If that is

not acceptable, I am sure you can excuse yourself as the situation dictates." The figure paused. "I will know if you contact anyone here. If you do, this will be our last conversation."

It only took the Count a few seconds to come to a conclusion. "Very well, I accept your terms, and I look forward to meeting you in person, Luke," Dooku said.

"Indeed, Count," the figure replied and disappeared, ending the conversation. Dooku stared at the place where the figure had been for several seconds. Just who was this 'Luke', and what exactly did he want?

The coming conversation promised to be most informative, and 'interesting' didn't begin to cover it.

xXx

Anakin slipped out of the end of the maintenance tunnel that he usually used to escape. Normally utilized by droids, such tunnels weren't commonly protected by more than a few cameras and a force field, both of which were easily manipulated from the inside of the temple. It was getting back inside that usually caused a problem, but a quick reprogramming of a few of the maintenance droids took care of that issue as well. They would let only him in, and no one would be the wiser. It had been one of his favorite escape routes as a padawan until he'd outgrown the tunnel sizes. As a ten-year-old, he had absolutely no problem whatsoever.

Checking to make sure that the security measures were back in place, Anakin gave a satisfied nod and began to walk down the hallway, glancing at the time as he went. His free two hours would be over soon, and he was due for lightsaber practice. He had no serious problem missing most of his other classes as they were simply rehashing his current education, but he absolutely refused to even consider missing lightsaber practice. He needed it too badly. Besides, learning the basics from someone other than Obi-wan was giving him a rather fresh view on the skill. Obi-wan would always insist that Anakin go back to the basics, but this was the first time he'd actually appreciated doing so.

He'd also begun to practice and study with some of his peers. After all, the extra practice couldn't hurt either him or them, even if they were woefully easy to predict. Actually, he'd been more than a little surprised when they'd come up and asked if he wanted to join them.

He couldn't remember if that had happened before or not. If it had, he'd rejected them. Perhaps the seclusion hadn't entirely been his classmates' fault?

The group consisted of five other initiates. The two he'd practically interrogated about Dooku just after arriving at the temple were among them. Hik'te, the blue-skinned boy from before, belonged to a race called 'Kark'oildee' that occupied a planet in the outer mid-rim area. An unusual chemical phenomenon turned most of the plants on the planet to various shades of blue and his species had adapted to blend in. Maelee, the dark-haired human who'd been discussing Dooku at the table as well, didn't even know where she came from and didn't care.

Coira, the other female in the group, was a human from Coruscant who liked to keep her hair short and planned on dying it several different colors when she became a padawan, although her natural hue was a dull blond.

The oldest boy in the group, a Bothan with light-tan fur named Thoran, seemed to be an information gatherer (no surprise there), and the final boy, Hale, was a large, quiet human who hadn't disclosed his background to Anakin yet.

All in all, it was a motley crew of children who wouldn't have even looked at each other if they hadn't been raised in the temple. Still, their different strengths seemed to make up for the various weaknesses for the most part, and being Jedi, they learned quickly—well, compared to clones and normal soldiers in any case.

Anakin wasn't sure what he found more frustrating; having to work with the children to begin with, or being reduced to their physical level. Still, it was his first step to gaining allies; allies that he would undoubtedly need in the future.

He turned down the hall leading to the lightsaber practice room. He'd be a good 40 minutes early, but would welcome the extra warm-up time.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind, then a twinge resonated through the Force. A very familiar twinge. Anakin stopped and concentrated on it for just a moment before his eyes widened ever so slightly.

It was Obi-wan. He'd just come back to Coruscant and was landing at the Temple...and he was hurt. Badly. For several minutes, Anakin

stood there in the hall, completely oblivious to his surroundings and anyone who happened to pass by. He couldn't stop the debate raging in his head. Part of him wanted to rush to the medical wing like he had every time Obi-wan had come back hurt in their previous life. The other half of him wanted to ignore Obi-wan even existed. He'd been avoiding the knight since their return. While they hadn't parted on bad terms (quite the opposite actually), it became uncomfortable for Anakin to be around him for extended periods of time. This Obi-wan was just so...different from his old master. Younger, even more idealistic (if that were possible), just a tad more reckless, and an eeopie load of other, tiny things that just tended to scream out to Anakin. It all reminded him rather blatantly that this was not his master, and yet there were so many things that *were* his Obi-wan that it was difficult to separate the two.

It was a confusing and sometimes painful conundrum.

And on top of all of that, he still hadn't gotten over the habit of thinking of ways to kill that particular Jedi. Not that he would ever use anything he came up with anymore, but that had been one of Vader's favorite pass times. It was an uncomfortable habit that Anakin was working on eradicating.

Still, didn't he owe Obi-wan at least that much? Just drop by and say 'hi, hope you're not hurt too badly.' Who else would, after all? Obi-wan had a good many friends in the future, but how many did he have now? Anakin couldn't remember.

Finally his concern for his former master won out. With a sigh and a longing look back at the practice room, he turned and began to hastily walk to the medic's wing.

xXx

"I swear..." Obi-wan winced as yet another strip of his make-shift bandage got torn off. "You are the most reckless," yank, "pathetic," tear, "accident prone," tug, "excuse for a Jedi this temple has ever seen!"

Obi-wan bit his lip as the rest of the bandage completely (and rather painfully) separated from his skin. Then he schooled his expression and looked up at the irritated Mon Calamari who now held a bacta patch that she would be using to scrub the rest of the dried blood away. He wanted to back away, but he knew the look on Bant's face. Better to just get it over with. She must have had a bad day.

"It's just a scratch," he muttered, mostly to himself, half hoping she didn't hear him.

He wasn't that lucky. "Just a scratch?" she literally screeched at him. "You almost lost your *arm* Obi-wan! Just in case you didn't notice that piece of...whatever the Force it was went *through* you! It didn't just cut, it *skewered!"* She'd already begun to clean and with every word, she scrubbed at the wound just hard enough to be painful, but soft enough to not seriously aggravate it more.

"I know, I was there," Obi-wan said with a hiss.

"Your body was," Bant returned. "I have no idea where your mind was!"

Obi-wan sighed, debating whether he should retort or not. He had indeed been thinking at the time, and that the ambassador he'd been protecting would have been killed if Obi-wan hadn't knocked him out of the way of the falling rubble. Now he'd *tried* to get out of the way too, but his arm had been caught by some of it. Things like that tended to happen on high-profile missions. He'd stuffed it full of bacta, wrapped it up with strips from his robe, and that had been that. He'd even finished the assignment. He didn't know why Bant was so upset when it could have been so much worse, and was about to say so when they heard someone clear their throat at the door.

Looking up, they saw a human padawan standing just outside the room; a healer's padawan judging from his attire.

Yes?" Bant asked, her voice holding just the slightest edge to it.

The boy swallowed, but when he spoke, he did so firmly and without a trace of fear. Obi-wan would have been impressed if he hadn't been in pain. Bant hadn't stopped cleaning the wound to talk (she never did), and Obi-wan knew from experience that she wouldn't even consider ending his torture until she was satisfied. He wasn't sure if that would be when she figured she had put Obi-wan through enough pain to learn his lesson, or when the wound was actually clean. He also wasn't about to ask. Best not to give her ideas.

"An initiate came in, asking after Knight Kenobi," he said.

Obi-wan blinked and looked up, surprised. He only really knew one initiate…

"And?" Bant asked.

The boy looked a little unsure. "He wishes to see him."

"He can wait," Bant started, but Obi-wan nodded his head at the Padawan, belying his friend's words.

"Show him in."

"Obi-wan," Bant hissed. "You want to show a child this?" She gestured to his fairly mutilated arm.

Obi-wan looked down. "He's seen worse." Anakin hadn't said so himself, but Obi-wan had little doubt that his words were true.

"I don't care," she retorted. "It isn't appropriate."

"He wouldn't be here if he didn't need to see for himself that I'll be alright." Truthfully, Obi-wan didn't know how he knew that. He suspected it had something to do with the Force and his strange connection to Anakin.

Bant didn't say anything, but the strawberry-blond knew she wasn't happy. Still, she'd relented, and that was all he really could ask for at the moment.

"Anakin Skywalker, Knight, Healer," the padawan said as he came back in, bowing respectfully. Behind him stood Anakin, stalwart as ever. He simply looked up at Obi-wan, watching with an expressionless face as the padawan left the room.

Almost instantly, Bant changed her demeanor completely. "Anakin? Welcome to the medical ward. My name is Bant." She stuck her webbed hand out, bending down so she was more on his level. Obi-wan didn't know who he should be embarrassed for. Here he was, practically helpless on a table while his friend decided to 'care' for him, but said friend was treating a former Dark Side trained initiate like…well, a child. Of course said child would be more than a little uncomfortable at the entire situation, although he hid it well.

The knight watched with interest as Anakin took the offered, comparatively strange hand without so much as a flinch. Apparently Bant was pleasantly surprised herself. Mon Calamari tended to be a little intimidating at a first meeting.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Healer Bant," he said respectfully. Obi-wan raised an eyebrow at the barely perceptible pause before 'meet'. Did he know Bant from somewhere? She wasn't exactly high-profile,

although she had been on her share of missions with her respective masters.

"And you as well," she said, standing up. "Do you mind if I call you Anakin, or would you prefer Initiate Skywalker?"

If he'd been uncomfortable before, he looked practically panicked now, but again, he hid it well. Obi-wan wouldn't have known if it hadn't been for that barely perceptible connection that gave him just a hint of the boy's feelings.

"Whichever you like," he replied carefully. She regarded him for a moment, and must have somehow sensed his unease.

"Initiate Skywalker it is," she said with a smile, blinking her overly large eyes. "But I want you to know that one of these days I want you to know you well enough to call you 'Anakin'."

He nodded, but didn't say anything. Was that a touch of guilt he was feeling? Obi-wan couldn't quite tell. Besides, why would the boy feel guilty about that?

"Meanwhile," Bant continued, "I'm assuming you're here for this clumsy nerf."

Anakin hid a smile as Bant walked back to where Obi-wan sat, bacta swab still in hand. She'd cleaned the wound, Obi-wan knew she had, but she still went back to scrubbing it. He bit back a sigh and a wince at the same time.

"You're hurt," Anakin stated.

Obi-wan forced a smile. "Obviously."

Anakin scowled. "Apparently you are fine," he said after shooting Obi-wan a dark look. Then he turned on his heel.

Both Obi-wan and Bant blinked at his back.

"Anakin," Obi-wan said. He didn't have to have a connection to feel the boy's annoyance, but he also felt just a touch of something else he couldn't quite place, and he didn't want him to leave it like that.

At the door, Anakin stopped and turned to face him.

"Thank you for coming. I will be fine, but I appreciate your concern." Nothing on his face really changed, but he did seem just a little more

relaxed, and Obi-wan didn't feel the disappointment anymore. Not that that meant anything, but still.

"You are welcome, M—" he cut off suddenly, eyes widening. Then, the disappointment and annoyance was back, but this time directed towards himself. "Knight Kenobi," he muttered, and then he was gone, taking long, steady steps with his hands firmly behind his back.

"What was that?" Bant asked.

Obi-wan shook his head. "I'm not sure," he replied. "He was a slave. Apparently he's still used to calling authority figures 'master'."

Bant didn't say anything, but by the way she set her jaw, Obi-wan could tell that even the mention of the boy's past pushed her toward anger. A thankfully well-controlled anger. If Obi-wan knew anyone he didn't want to turn Dark Side, it was Bant. The very thought sent shivers up and down his spine. Fortunately, he was also more than sure that she was in no danger, despite her frustration.

"You're staying in here for the rest of the night," she informed him, turning her attention back to her patient, who held in a groan. "And don't even try to get out of it."

"Yes ma'am," he murmured.

"Don't you use that tone of voice with me," she growled, taking out some rather nasty looking tools. "I'm going to try and undo some damage, but it's more than likely that you'll have a scar, and I want to watch it overnight."

Obi-wan looked down. "You don't have to worry about me, Bant," he said softly. She stopped what she was doing and looked back at him.

"If I don't, who will?" she asked, her voice equally as soft.

"That's the point of becoming a knight," he replied, unable to look at her. Then he took a deep breath. "Qui-gon's gone. I've come to terms with that."

Even though he couldn't see her, he could still tell she'd shaken her head. "That's not something you ever come to terms with." Obi-wan didn't say anything. If anyone knew, she did. "Besides, I'd do this whether you had a master or not. Or have you forgotten?"

"It's far too painful to forget," he retorted, smiling. She hit his good

arm and got a complaint for her trouble. Still, he felt his heart had eased just a little.

xXx

Well, that had been completely and utterly useless. Anakin shook his head as he headed towards the healer's wing exit. At least it hadn't taken as long as he'd expected. He still had fifteen minutes to get to class. Maybe he could even begin that warm up he'd wanted before.

He'd just reached the entrance to the medical wing when it hit him. It felt as if the Force had suddenly doused him in an icy ocean. Stopping, he gasped, clutching his chest. It almost felt like he couldn't breathe. This was how he'd felt before when he'd needed a respirator...

It was a bond, he realized. One he hadn't known was there this time, and he almost kicked himself. He should have known. If he still had one with Obi-wan, then this one would be there too.

A passing medic had come over to him, asking something Anakin couldn't make out rather frantically. He couldn't answer as he was too focused on breathing at the moment. Something horrible had begun; something that would cause someone a slow, agonizing death.

Torture. Sith Torture.

Still gasping, he could only utter one word as he fought the blackness creeping around the edge of his vision. "Sidious."

xXx

Darth Sidious closed the door with a quiet ease that belied the large object's weight before turning to the only occupant in the room. She didn't seem to realize that he was there, but he didn't mind. That wouldn't be a problem for him. Quite the contrary, actually. He allowed an anticipatory smile onto his features. It would be most pleasant to hear her mentally screaming in agony, unable to do so aloud. Right now, she would not utter a sound. He would ensure that she would be physically unable to do so later.

Unfortunately for her, he wasn't in a good mood. It had taken him far too long to arrange to be on his home planet so he could personally interrogate her so soon after his previous visit. He'd had to have the perfect alibi after all. Still, the wait had been worth while. Now he could gain the information he needed and no one would be the wiser.

Stepping forward, the only sound she could utter was a soft gasp before her mental screams began to siphon to him, and he reveled in them.

With a smile, he began to tear through her head and memories. He'd forgotten just how blissful inflicting torture could be.

It only took minutes. He didn't have time to draw it out more than that, but he got what he could and then exited, leaving the former assassin on the floor, still screaming silently. It would take her hours to finally stop breathing, but her death was assured, and she still would not be able to be anything other than absolutely silent.

He left in a far better mood than when he'd arrived, and had a mental picture of this new Sith. He also had a name.

Perhaps this wouldn't be so difficult after all.

Chapter End Notes

This is why it took me 2-3 years to write. Yes. This chapter. It would not have gotten done without BATFAN7. Please, PLEASE give her props!

*Note: Didi was the owner of a cafe that Qui-gon and Obi-wan would visit. Didi and Astri (Brother and sister, or cousins I believe) didn't have the shiniest past and tended to have connections. They used those connections to help the Jedi once (Anakin and Obi-wan of course), and then Astri married a man from the outer rim and both she and Didi moved out there, probably to get away and hide from the people who would be upset that they'd smuggled Jedi into a slave and spice ring (although it doesn't say in the books I read, just hints at it). Didi sold this diner to Dexter, someone with just as little repute as himself. Hence we get 'Dex's Diner' in AotC.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He'd missed his lightsaber practice. Anakin scowled at the wall opposite of the bed the healer from the hall had placed him in. Why did such a trivial thing bother him so much? Someone had just been tortured and if they hadn't died already, they would be dead shortly. He knew that should bother him far more than missing his lightsaber practice, but it didn't. That fact *did*.

Perhaps some habits were never unlearned. He found the revelation about himself to be quite disturbing.

At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to be away from the hospital wing and his unnerving thoughts. He hated just sitting around when he could be doing something productive. They'd examined him and pronounced him to be physically sound. So why couldn't they just let him leave? He'd asked (demanded) and been told that they had to wait for test results as a general policy before they could release him. He'd forgotten about that particularly hated policy.

Sighing, he went back to staring at the wall. He may not be in the same room as his former master, but he found it ironic that they would end up in the healer's wing at the same time, albeit for completely different reasons.

He tried to relax himself, but found the techniques he used to be only marginally effective. Then his eyes turned to the door as the healer from earlier, one Knight Tokpoffi, finally came walking back into the room. He smiled warmly at Anakin.

"Well, it seems all of the tests have come back, and you're in perfect health."

Anakin resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Of course he was in perfect health.

The man frowned thoughtfully. "We don't know why you had an attack like that, but we'll definitely keep an eye on it."

"Thank you," Anakin said as politely as he could. "May I go now?"

"Of course," the knight said. "But please come back if it happens again."

"Yes, sir," Anakin replied, trying not to rip the sheets off of him as he climbed out of bed.

"Have a good day," Knight Tokpoffi called after him as he walked briskly down the hall, keeping a lookout for Obi-wan. There was a real possibility they could run into each other here after all, and Anakin had had enough for now. It wasn't that he disliked being around Obi-wan, he just...didn't know how to act around him anymore. Anakin shouldn't (couldn't) treat him like his master, nor did he want to treat him as an enemy, but there was too much between them, even if only from Anakin's side, to interact with him as an acquaintance. He honestly didn't know what to do and so thus wanted to simply avoid—

A twinge in the Force had him stopping and backing up almost without him realizing. Someone familiar occupied a room he'd just passed. Peeking in, he realized he couldn't see them from the door because the bed was situated so that a passer by couldn't just look in and glimpse anything more than that this room was occupied. So he walked in carefully, eying the bed as it came into view.

Then his breath caught in his throat. On the twin-sized mattress lay a woman with blond hair spread around her like a halo. She had various contraptions locked onto her mouth and nose, but that didn't stop Anakin from recognizing her immediately.

"Siri Tachi," he whispered.

xXx

Obi-wan cared deeply for Bant. She had always been the closest thing he'd had to a sister and she'd gotten him out of (and into) more than one scrape. That did not in any way change how he felt about the healer's wing. Knight or not, he wanted out. Now.

Unfortunately he'd come to the conclusion once he'd become a senior padawan that he could no longer give into such childish impulses. Now that he was a knight, that wasn't about to change. If anything, he felt he had to be even more strict with himself.

The biggest problem was knowing that Qui-gon wasn't going to walk in that door at any minute to scold him for being reckless and tell him that he'd gotten what he deserved. Just after Bant had left him alone to tend to her other duties it hadn't been so hard, but as the minutes

wore on, the room began to feel even more claustrophobic than usual.

Finally, after two standard hours, being unable to sleep or even meditate, he'd had enough. He'd promised to stay in the healer's wing overnight. Surely that didn't mean he had to stay in his room. A short, calming walk wouldn't hurt him or anyone else.

Besides, this happened to be the first time he'd really had enough time between assignments to do much more than prepare for upcoming missions. He'd actually been rather lucky. Despite the difficult assignments that normally came with knighthood, he hadn't been admitted to the healers wing before. He felt that fact attested more to Qui-gon's training than it did to his own personal skill.

Truthfully there was someone he'd been meaning to visit. Now he actually had the time and happened to be in the same area, albeit with less than desirable circumstances than he would have preferred, but still... Surely Bant wouldn't be too upset with him if he went for a visit now.

Still, sneaking around the healers would probably be prudent. The less she knew, the less she could get angry about, after all.

He would never admit out loud that Bant sometimes scared him more than Master Windu did.

Which is how he found himself suppressing his force presence as he sneaked around the different healers and other Jedi that had come to the wing. He actually found that he rather enjoyed the self-given mission, ignoring the immaturity of it altogether. Of course, he would have an interesting time explaining himself if he were caught by...well, anyone, but he found that that didn't bother him in the slightest.

He was rather proud of himself for finding her room without being seen once. That all vanished in surprise when he walked into her room only to see a small figure watching her with what looked like utter shock.

Curious. Why should Anakin, who couldn't have possibly met Siri before, be surprised to see a random person in the healer's wing?

"Anakin?" he asked softly. The boy jumped and whirled around as if he'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Master," he said out of reflex. Obi-wan frowned. Almost immediately,

the former slave caught himself. "I mean Obi-wan," he amended, looking as if he were mentally kicking himself. "I mean, Knight Kenobi."

The red-head smiled. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it in time; being your own master." Anakin snorted and looked away, causing Obi-wan to frown again. "I know it may not seem like it now, but time heals all wounds."

"I don't think I can agree with that," the boy muttered bitterly.

Somehow, Obi-wan knew he wouldn't be able to change the boy's mind, and decided against protesting. Some things one had to find out for themselves. They stood there in an awkward silence for several seconds before the knight cleared his throat.

"So, may I ask why you're in here? If I didn't know any better I'd say you'd just seen a ghost." It was a pathetic attempt to lighten the mood. As such, it had the opposite effect.

"She just...looks like someone I knew," the boy answered quietly. Immediately Obi-wan could tell Anakin was keeping something back.

"Oh? Who?" he asked cautiously.

The blond boy glanced back at Siri uncomfortably. "Someone my former master used to know."

Ah, that explained a lot. "I see," Obi-wan said quietly. "Someone you had a difficult time with?"

Anakin bit his lip. "Something like that."

The knight brought a hand up to his chin thoughtfully. It wasn't something that they normally had to deal with, but he wondered if he should get Anakin to see a mind healer about abuse. It may not be his place, he wasn't the boy's master after all, but he would suggest it to Master Yoda the next time their paths crossed. Perhaps it was even more necessary to get him into a mind healer *because* he didn't have a master yet.

He filed the thought away for later.

"Well," he spoke up as he walked over to take a seat, gesturing for Anakin to do so as well. The boy looked uncomfortable, but sat down anyway after a slight pause. "Let me introduce you."

"She's in a coma."

Obi-wan raised an eyebrow, eyes sparkling. "Yes, I can see."

The dry expression Anakin shot him almost made his stoic facade crack into a hearty laugh. Almost. Instead, he simply grinned. The boy seemed to realize he was being teased and scowled, which only made Obi-wan want to laugh harder.

"This is Siri Tachi, an old friend of mine," he said to Anakin. Then he turned to the prone figure on the bed, smile dimming slightly. It hurt to see her like this. She should be running and laughing and teasing and being a general pain in the backside, not lying so deathly still. "Siri, this is a new initiate. His name is Anakin Skywalker."

"She can't hear you," Anakin muttered.

Obi-wan wanted to sigh. "I sincerely hope you're wrong, Anakin."

They fell into a lapse of words that was thankfully far more comfortable than the previous silence. That didn't mean it wasn't somewhat tense, although Obi-wan couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

"Why is she here?" Anakin asked finally, breaking the silence.

The knight shook his head. "We don't know."

Anakin frowned. "Do you even know what happened?"

Obi-wan shook his head. "Only that she collapsed about a standard week before Qui-gon and I..." he paused for a moment, but then set his jaw and plowed on. "Before Qui-gon and I left on the mission where we found you."

xXx

It took a few seconds for Anakin to really process Obi-wan's words and make all the connections, but when he did, the former slave sincerely hoped he didn't look like he'd blanched too much because he had certainly felt the blood drain from his face. He'd come back in time to about that point, unknowingly bringing the spirit of his Siri Tachi with him. That couldn't be a coincidence. He'd have to try and talk to the Siri from his original time line as soon as possible...not that he was looking forward to doing so. At one point, he and Siri had been fairly good friends, and he held far fewer negative feelings towards her than

most of the other Jedi he'd come across in this time period because she'd died before he had turned.

Now it felt as if they'd never gotten along. He felt he should be used to it as he hadn't really mixed well with most Jedi, but having Siri so openly hostile towards him hurt, a lot more than he thought it should. She'd been one of the few Jedi he'd been able to more or less tolerate —count as a friend, even. He really needed to fix that. He'd have to at least try to remedy his general mindset that seemed to make him want to distance himself from his fellow order members, although he wasn't sure how effective his efforts would be. Truthfully, he wasn't sure he could ever truly 'get along' with anyone who wasn't Padme...and maybe Obi-wan (on a good day). Sith weren't exactly encouraged to work on their social skills, so what few abilities he'd acquired before he'd fallen were rusty at best, non-existent at worst.

To make matters worse, he only had his teachers and fellow initiates to interact with in an attempt to regain those skills, and he doubted treating other knights and masters like fellow children would end well. He also didn't think his pride could handle treating everyone else as he should a teacher.

"And she's been like this ever since?" Anakin asked, ignoring the shakiness in his voice.

Obi-wan sighed and sat back in his chair, smile completely gone. "Yes."

"It must be hard," Anakin said slowly, "seeing a friend like this."

The knight glanced over at the initiate, but Anakin couldn't read the expression in those blue-gray irises. "It is."

The way Obi-wan said it reminded the former Sith of his previous discussion with Siri in his dream state. Did they have feelings for each other now, or had that come later? Or had they always been there? With as wistful as Obi-wan sounded, Anakin found he could certainly see the latter, but he couldn't quite believe it. The idea of his former master having such feelings towards another Jedi still seemed like a foreign concept to him.

"Um...I need to get back to my classes," Anakin said awkwardly, suddenly wanting to leave the two alone.

Obi-wan blinked and glanced over at him. "Oh, of course. I didn't mean to keep you."

"It's fine," the boy replied, climbing down off of his chair.

"Oh, and Anakin..." The initiate stopped and turned to glance at his former mentor. "I wanted to thank you again for coming to see me today. You didn't have to and I do appreciate it."

Anakin nodded, feeling a small smile come to his lips. Then he turned and strode quickly out of the room, and then out of the wing as he forced his mind to turn to his physical inadequacies and exactly what he had to do to regain the skills his trip back in time had cost him.

xXx

Anakin hated being bored. He always had.

Unfortunately, listening to a condescending Jedi teacher lecture about history for the second time most definitely qualified as boring. Several times over. As Vader, he'd been required to attend board meetings, political parties, general social events, and Senate meetings that he may possibly be able to classify as more tedious, but most of those had either been somewhat relevant with previously unknown information being brought to the table or week-long celebrations that would fulfill his 'attendee requirements' (given to him by the Emperor—he insisted on keeping up public appearances) for the year. The idea of having to go through such a tedious block of time—such as a class he'd already passed—every single day for an entire year almost made Anakin wish for the social parties again. Almost.

So, now, he sat in his desk, staring blankly up at the Jedi lecturing at the head of the class, allowing his mind to wander as he leaned his chin on the palm of his hand. After all, he really did know all of this and so he'd decided that he should focus on more upcoming and important events. He was, after all, far more concerned with the future than that past.

He found his thoughts wandering to his upcoming meeting with Dooku and frowned. He'd planned that encounter for months, knowing full well that he would end up having to meet the man in person. That had presented a rather large flaw in his whole scheme: He couldn't afford to reveal himself to the man yet. Although Anakin doubted it, Dooku could easily have already contacted Sidious and made the alliance that would eventually drive the Count to turn. If that were the case, then Anakin would be lucky to get out alive. But more concerning to him was the problem that if he arrived at the meeting as a short being with a mask, it would be all too easy to put two and two

together. He could just imagine both old men tweaking some aspect of their scheme for the hundredth time over some Woviain Tea (said to be one of the most expensive teas in the universe) as the subject came up. "Oh, and who was the small child who has just arrived at the Temple? Oh, yes, didn't he have previous Dark Side training?"

Thankfully he'd been able to play down said 'dark side training' to the council and consequently the rest of the Jedi. He wouldn't be surprised if Yoda suspected that his 'brief training period' was more than what Anakin had let on, but he doubted any other Jedi would suspect such from a 9-year-old. It was ironically amusing that they had a full-blown Sith in their midst and they didn't even suspect—more ironic than Palpatine's deception, even. Still, Sidious was intelligent and, especially at this point in time, he tended to think out of the box and could guess quite accurately at the smallest of details only to use those correct assumptions to further his own plans. It wouldn't be that much of a stretch for the two men to realize exactly who he was. Not only would that put him in danger, but it would potentially put the Temple (not to mention the *entire future*) in danger also.

Well, more danger.

As much as he may despise the Jedi method of teaching and living, he would prefer to keep them alive this time around. Well, he would prefer to at least not be the cause of their demise. Even as Vader the faces of those children had haunted him...

Funny how quickly guilt can be turned into anger.

Focusing back on the task at hand, he thought about his solution. He'd bought electrical equipment to make himself mechanical legs and arms that he'd be able to control with his movements. The very idea was not a comfortable one, but was the only solution he could come up with. If he sent a droid, that would not only offend Dooku, but instantly make him suspicious. They both knew Anakin had steered the conversation towards their meeting, so why would he suggest something and then not follow through?

He couldn't go as himself. True, there were many small races throughout the galaxy, but it would still be too easy to guess his identity—even through a disguise—at his normal height. So a disguise that discouraged both Sidious and Dooku from associating Anakin Skywalker with the former 'Sith Apprentice' was the solution. Hence the mechanical arm and leg extensions. Admittedly the proportion of

the joints would be off, but that wasn't something he could easily fix. His torso would also be too small to completely pass himself off as a human adult, so he'd come up with a list of other races that had similar proportions and had fashioned several different pairs of hands for the ends of the mechanical limbs. It was all a matter of which he wanted to choose. The problem he ran into here was that all races had their pros and cons, and he'd been studying up on the different social and physical tics of each race to try and decide.

Then there was the hardware problem. With Anakin's knowledge it wasn't that difficult to build the mechanical limbs, and with enough time he could make any of them indistinguishable from real-life, but in truth, he didn't have that time. Even with his skill he knew someone as experienced as Dooku could potentially identify the limbs as unnatural, so he needed to prepare for that potential discussion topic. Additionally, many of the major components were...difficult to acquire and it would be awkward if his mechanical limbs were discovered by the Jedi as that could also lead to the Council discovering his frequent escapades from the Temple. He would have to find another place to store them once he finished the project. He'd already almost completed them, but his construction and practice with the artificial limbs (he had to look somewhat natural in them to pull this off after all) had begun to cut into his racing time, and he needed those profits to continue building them. Catch 22.

"Anakin!" A harsh hiss drew him out of his thoughts, and he glanced over to the seat next to him. Coira nodded towards the front of the class, where the teacher had stopped talking only to stare directly at him.

"I apologize," he said, not bothering to keep the boredom from his voice. "Could you repeat the question?"

"Initiate Skywalker, it would be appreciated if you could listen to the lesson."

Anakin blinked at the instructor. "I do know it rather well already, but I apologize for letting my mind wander. Could you please repeat the question?"

The instructor frowned. "I asked what events lead up to the creation of the Republic."

Anakin nodded and proceeded to launch into a five-minute lecture about the events leading up to the formation of the current Republic.

He did his best to stick to facts that would be in the Jedi readings as the Empire and the Sith both had their own version of the events.

When he finished, the instructor regarded him with a thoughtful expression. "Initiate Skywalker, if you know this already, why have you not informed us before? I will speak to the Council about moving you to a different class. Would that be acceptable?"

Anakin blinked again, this time out of surprise. "I appreciate the thought, Master."

The teacher (and Anakin could not for the life of him remember the man's name) smiled and nodded in satisfaction before continuing with his lesson, leaving Anakin to collect himself. He'd never had such an offer presented to him before, no matter how advanced he'd been in the subjects. Why now?

Although he dwelt on the question for the rest of the class period, he could not seem to come up with an adequate answer.

xXx

Later that night...

Anakin had learned the art of meditation as a Jedi, but had only come to appreciate it as a Sith. The irony was not lost on him. Sith had their own form of meditation but the basic fundamentals couldn't be more different than the Jedi.

The Jedi believe in a sort of apathetic peace while the Sith believe in burning, negative passion. Jedi meditation tended to deal with clearing your mind and asking for a connection with the Force. Sith meditation could never be instigated without some sort of focal point, usually an extremely strong emotion such as pain, anger or hatred that demanded a connection. One would focus on that emotion and then try to link other emotions to it. The goal was to encompass all of your being into that focal point emotion so as to have an endless connection with the Dark Side. The best Sith could focus on any given emotion and attain that connection. Anakin, as Vader, had only ever achieved such a connection through anger, fear or pain.

Truthfully, looking back, he was a little surprised he'd been able to attain it at all as his lack of focus tended to be a rather prominent part of his personality. The problem he'd run into, though, was the fact that he'd had to sit for hours on end while being fed and having waste extracted from his body. He'd had little else to do, and meditation was

better than sitting around doing nothing. The circumstance had quite literally forced him to learn (in a twisted, dark way) what Obi-wan had been trying to teach him for years: Meditation is a valuable tool.

Now as he sat in his room and tried to clear his mind, he couldn't help the frustration building inside of him. For years he'd hated the Jedi technique, and the Sith method he'd honed for decades. Even though he refused to even attempt to meditate in any fashion close to the Sith techniques, he kept finding his mind drifting, wanting to grab hold of an emotion.

Now he could banish feelings to the Force, a basic skill every single youngling was taught with typical Jedi devotion. Unfortunately, that was also the most fundamental form of light meditation. To go deeper than that, one had to truly clear their mind. Often this was done *by* banishing feelings to the Force.

He kept trying to do so now, but some part of him did not seem to want to let go, and as such, he could not truly gain a meditative state. Currently, at best he could attain a light trance, and that had been nothing short of rare and difficult at best these last few months. His 'Force Techniques' class was the only one he was still behind in (ironically, even more so than when he had taken that class before). Between his frustration and the somewhat unsettling conversation he'd had with his former master about Padawan Tachi (it was strange to think of her as anything but a Knight), anything more at the moment just wasn't possible, but he needed to talk to his Siri and had no idea how to contact her except through meditation. In all actuality, he was hoping that just trying to get into the right mind set would at least call her to his dreams again, but neither his conscious or his subconscious mind wanted to cooperate.

Finally, after far too much effort and wasted time, he shoved all of his frustration as best he could into the Force and crawled into bed. He couldn't help but feel glad that tonight was his night to stay in the Temple because it surprised him as to how tired he was. Thankfully, it did not take him long to fall asleep. However, he did not dream that night.

xXx

A few days later...

Anakin paced restlessly outside of Master Yoda's meditation room wondering why he'd been summoned. Had they discovered his extra

curricular activities? His bank accounts or night time trips to the lower sectors? He doubted it. They would have summoned him more formally in that particular case, he felt sure. He could only really race twice a week or so. One night a week he would sneak out and work on the mechanical limbs which he would need to interact with Dooku. He'd gone for simple designs and had come up with several successful products, but as they didn't actually connect to his nerves, he found them far more difficult to use than he felt someone who had lived with mechanical limbs for years should.

Usually he would spend once a week visiting the dumps and lower-level scrap heaps or shops to find parts and tools he needed for said arms or the droids he liked to build. The remaining nights, he actually slept. If he wanted to get his body into shape as quickly as he could, he needed his sleep and so he made sure to have several hours of rest a night, even on his racing, building, practicing and scavenging nights.

He was keeping up with (actually exceeding, even with him trying to hold back) most of his classes and he knew he'd begun to get much better with his lightsaber skills, although that was no particular surprise. In his first life he'd picked up on that one particularly fast (not as quickly as Luke had, he thought back with a combination of jealousy and pride). That had been before he'd had the knowledge of the necessary basics and his favored forms. Really at this point, it was a matter of muscle memory, and that was something he worked on when he was sure no one else was around. In class, he had to stick to the forms he'd been taught at the temple, but he could usually sneak in a few hours of solitary lightsaber training in one of the practice rooms that he knew wasn't being monitored or recorded. He just didn't dare let on as to how much he really knew.

That was another thing that bothered him, though. He was pleased with how quickly he'd picked up his saber training, but his favored form, V (and he'd easily mastered both Shien and Djem So in his previous life) was not something that really suited his current body. He was just too short. As such, he'd taken a page out of Yoda's book and had decided to try and work some Ataru into his personal style. As Vader he'd modified his knowledge of the forms and had worked in some rather dark-based slashes and finishes over the years. Now he worked to replace those with the form IV acrobatics. It had slowed down his progress, but he didn't feel completely inadequate anymore. He desperately wished he had someone he could fight against and test his limits, but didn't dare ask anyone. The initiates didn't even begin to have the skill to challenge him and his unrestrained knowledge would bring up too many unanswerable questions from anyone else—

not just in lightsaber practice.

He knew he had too many inconsistencies in his life right now, and he really had no way of addressing them without spilling the truth. A truth no one would believe. Even if they did believe it, he still did not want to expose the true extent of his past actions. The council and most of the Jedi hadn't trusted him before, and they probably trusted him even less now. The last thing he needed to do was confirm their suspicions. Still, he didn't know what he would say to whatever inconsistency they'd decided to confront him over. And he really had no way of knowing until they let him in and spoke with him and what the kriff was taking them so long anyway?! It wasn't like a council meeting or anything.

Just when he thought he might start pulling his hair out in frustration, a shimmer in the Force caused the door to open. Half relieved, half nervous, Anakin walked slowly in and bowed to the two figures sitting inside. Master Yoda, of course, and surprisingly, Master Adi Gallia. She had a reputation for being no-nonsense, but fair. She also tended to be a tad bit more open minded than the rest of the council (although that didn't say much in Anakin's opinion).

Still, he was surprised to see her there as he had no personal connection to her at all.

"Masters?" he said cautiously.

"Initiate Skywalker," Adi Gallia said, her voice soft but firm.

Yoda also spoke up, "Young Skywalker." He really wished people would stop calling him that. "Brought to our attention a certain matter was."

Anakin checked to make sure his mental and emotional shields were firmly in place before he allowed himself to reply. He needed that racing money! And he needed to be able to contact Dooku. What would he do if they tried to make him stop? Because he wouldn't. Of course, if it came down to a matter of his life at the temple vs. a chance to stop Palpatine he knew what he'd choose. Still, he did his best to remain calm. Unlike his former self, he would not jump to conclusions, no matter how worried he was.

"And what would that be, Master?" he asked as calmly as he could and almost winced when it came out a bit colder than he'd wanted. It would have been how Vader would have addressed Sidious had the Sith Master brought up unpleasant business.

If either one noticed, they didn't show it.

"Please understand," Adi Gallia said, her voice even softer, "that we here in the temple tend to grow up rather differently than you." Anakin wanted to snort. That was the understatement of the century. "Our entire society and way of thinking is fundamentally different."

"A bad thing, it is not," Yoda cut in to clarify, puzzling Anakin. It wasn't a bad thing he grew up as a slave? That didn't sound like the Yoda he knew. He was missing something. "A simple fact it is."

"You grew up in an environment that wasn't conducive to many of our ways of life, and so as such, we owe you an apology." Well that floored Anakin.

"W-what?" he asked, unable to keep his mask from slipping.

"We've been treating you as we would any other initiate," the woman said with a small, slightly sad smile. "We know that your mother is very dear to you and she did her best to raise you—"

"A fine job she did, hmm?" Yoda commented with a chuckle.

He could have sworn Master Gallia rolled her eyes there for a moment, in a fond way. Okay, too many mind-blowing events in a row. He couldn't seem to process it all.

"But you still grew up in an extremely undesirable position. Between your slavery and your force training it's truly a wonder we found you at all."

"Worried, we are, that mistreated you were," Yoda said, all traces of amusement gone.

Wait, mistreated? As in abused?

He had to stomp on a flash of anger. "My mother did not beat me!"

"We don't believe she did," Master Gallia said soothingly. "But as a slave, you were subject to beatings, were you not?"

Anakin closed his mouth, unable to refute that. Watto had been a decent master all things considered, but he'd still occasionally beaten them. It was the norm for a slave master. Encouraged even. He'd long since buried the memories in the back of his mind and it was something he avoided thinking about to this day, although he'd

occasionally revisited them as a Sith to gain power from his anger at the harsh treatment (even now he was struggling to keep his anger in check) but truthfully he'd been submitted to so much worse. Palpatine's Force-lightning, for instance. Never enough to overload his circuits, but always enough to hurt immensely. Or getting his limbs chopped off. Or living in a state of constant pain as he walked around in a life-support suit. Really what still angered him about those old beatings was the fact that his mother was still subject to them at this point.

He did not want to revisit any memories like that in front of the Jedi. He knew himself and he knew his tendencies, and because one thought led to another, he wasn't sure he could conceal his anger...or his fear.

When he didn't answer the question, Master Gallia continued. "Or worse, we suspect. As such, we want you to see a mind healer."

It was getting *extremely* hard to ignore the anger. "I'm not crazy," he said, his voice practically ice now. He was proud of the fact that he hadn't said it through gritted teeth as he would have undoubtedly done in his original youth.

"Say that, did we?" Yoda asked, sounding genuinely curious and frustratingly placating. That was probably why Adi Gallia and Yoda had been chosen to relay this message to him as they tended to be the most tranquil and steadfast of masters in the face of everything from galactic war to upset children.

"We don't think you are crazy," Master Gallia stated firmly, face fixed in a disapproving expression. "It's a matter of learning to deal with your emotions."

Typical Jedi. Their idea of 'dealing' with emotions was throwing them away and ignoring the fact that they exist. He'd tried, he really had, but he suspected that the fact that their 'solution' to the 'emotions problem' still irked him had probably been a large factor in his inability to meditate. He did not like the sound of this one bit. His memories were in the past (and another future that would *not* happen) and should remain there. Besides, how was he supposed to 'open up' and give his entire life story to any Jedi? It wasn't just a matter of trust (which they still did not have), it was a matter of staying out of some sort of institution and a matter of not letting Palpatine know what was going on.

"I am not comfortable with that,"Anakin allowed himself to say after a few tense seconds, a note of finality in his voice that he hadn't heard for a while.

A sigh from the direction of the Masters. "You're not supposed to be."

"Know we do that hard it is for you to trust us," Yoda said. Anakin blinked in surprise, a little of his anger vanishing.

"Y...you do?"

"You've been trained somewhat in our ways, but you've been trained in the Dark Side as well," Master Gallia pointed out. "If you have been trained in the ways of the Dark, you have undoubtedly been trained to not trust anyone, especially Jedi."

Anakin stared at them for a few seconds, his anger continuing to dissipate. Then it was replaced by a sort of grim amusement. Her statement held some truth to it. Palpatine had always encouraged him to never trust the Jedi. It hadn't been shoved down his throat like a lot of the Dark Side philosophy he'd been fed after he'd turned, but subtly and long before his fall, he had indeed been taught to mistrust not just the Jedi, but everyone.

"A solution we have," Yoda said.

Master Gallia nodded. "There was a program created for people with high-stress careers requiring them to keep confidential information. As their jobs would not allow for them to reveal any details, it made therapy moot. The solution was a combination therapy program. The agents would be required to visit with a mind healer for what they could reveal, but they would also be required to speak to a specially programmed droid for anything highly confidential. The droid's memory would then be completely erased."

She paused for a moment, her hard expression softening ever so slightly while Anakin balked. He could never just spill all of his secrets to a *droid*. Still, he listened as she continued. "We want you to trust us, Initiate Skywalker, but we know that is a tall order for now. Until you can trust us, we will be implementing something similar to that program."

"For your peace of mind, this is," Yoda said with a nod. "Intrude upon your past we will not."

"As part of your initiate training, since you are surprisingly ahead in

most of your classes, you are now required to attend a two time-block session twice a week with some mind-healers and a droid we've commissioned especially for this. The hard drive for the robot's memory will be entrusted to you to do with as you please. Wipe it clean or keep it, but bring it back to every session. We would hope that you could eventually trust us with your past," Master Gallia said, her firm voice and expression returning to its normal tranquility, "and any information of your former Dark Master you may have. It could help our cause immensely, but we will not pry."

Anakin almost let out a snort. Almost. They really had no idea. Still, they'd definitely gone out of their way to do this for him. Unwanted as their actions may be, he still felt oddly touched. Still, revisiting his anger was not something he felt he could do. He seriously doubted he could avoid the Dark Side if he prodded that locked chest too often and lost control again, and this time neither Padme or Luke would be there to stop him.

"I feel this is not a good idea," he said uncomfortably. They really had no idea what they would be getting him (or themselves) into.

"Unanimous, the Council is," Yoda stated firmly.

"If you wish to continue on as an initiate, you will be required to do this," Adi Gallia confirmed.

Oh, this was *such* a bad idea. But what choice did he have? At least they hadn't brought up his extra-curricular activities. Thank the Force.

"Do you understand?" Her voice had hardened and brokered no argument.

He *really* did not want to do this. But they weren't kidding about kicking him out of the Order. He'd been expecting something like that, actually. It had been a long-time coming, and was for a far different reason than what he'd supposed, but he'd still been expecting it. It was a bit of a confirmation, and while he was a little disappointed, he felt more grateful that they'd come out and just told him. He knew where he stood with the Council for the most part now, and that helped to ground him in its own way.

He still stalled in answering for as long as he dared. "Yes," he muttered finally and found himself desperately hoping that they wouldn't all come to regret it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Batfan7 for beta reading! She's amazing!

I know this was more or less a set-up/filler chapter, but I hope it wasn't too boring. Note, it will probably get worse before it gets better. ^^; Between Anakin's therapy (or his version of it), Dooku and a few other things I have in mind...well, I'm just hoping that I live up to everyone's expectations. The response I've gotten on this is...mind-blowing. To an extent where I've only had one other story do this well (Mistaken Relations). I'm thrilled and honored and want to thank EVERYONE who reviewed (so many of you! I love you all!)!

Anyway, please let me know what you think! Is there anything that doesn't make sense? Anything that needs clarification? Any plot holes? Any out of character activity? I'd love to know! Thank you!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hey, are you alright?" Anakin looked up from the data pad he was supposed to be studying for class (on mechanics, he seriously doubted he'd have a problem with anything they could throw at him) and saw, to his surprise, Hale's fairly large, round face gazing thoughtfully down at him.

He blinked. The boy hardly said more than a few sentences in class (or at any other time) and tended to blend into the background. He was by no means particularly memorable and Anakin rarely spoke to him, but when he did he usually had to instigate the conversation.

It took him a few seconds to get over his mild surprise at the boy's sudden question.

"Yes," he finally said with a nod of his head. "What would make you think otherwise?"

The boy shrugged and moved to sit by Anakin. He and his group of initiate acquaintances had come to the room of a thousand fountains to study and had spread out over a particular clearing surrounded by trees and large piles of rocks that made the landscape look very natural. It had always been one of Anakin's favorite places to come before, and the other initiates seemed to enjoy it as well.

Once Hale had made himself comfortable on a nearby rock he looked at Anakin with a surprisingly intense expression.

"You're usually sad," he said finally. "Today you seem...anxious."

Anakin blinked at the boy and had to reassess him. He'd seen the other boy studying their fellow initiates in class with a focus he'd almost been jealous of. It had been one of the things that had drawn Anakin to take a closer look at the otherwise plain, average boy. He hadn't realized just how much Hale actually noticed though, apparently.

"What makes you say that?"

Hale raised one eyebrow slightly. "You act older when you're

distracted."

That caused Anakin to stiffen a bit. Were his actions that obvious? Even to a child? Or was Hale just particularly insightful? He didn't think Hale had ever been taken as a Padawan in his previous life, but if he were this observant, Anakin couldn't help but wonder why not.

"I act older?" he asked quietly, turning his gaze back to the data pad.

"Yeah," the other boy affirmed. "You know so much more than the rest of us, but you usually try to blend in. You're helping us and you push us, but you don't have to. It's usually not so obvious, but when you're worried, you stop talking to us. It's already hard enough to get you to smile, but when you're like this it's almost as if you'll never smile again. So something's wrong."

It was probably the most Anakin had ever heard the boy say, and he found himself torn between being impressed, worried and a little shocked. Sometimes it amazed him as to just how intelligent the children around him were.

He shook his head at the thought, then looked back up at Hale. He had a couple of options here. He could dismiss the boy's observations as nothing, although he doubted the other boy would appreciate that, he could be vague and cryptic with his answers, or he could be outright truthful. He finally decided on the latter because it would help the others trust him more, and he saw little reason to lie at this point.

"Because I came to the Temple later than everyone else, and because of my background, the Council has decided that I need to see a mind-healer."

Hale's eyebrows furrowed. "Why?"

Anakin shook his head and scowled. "They think I need help, apparently."

The other boy cocked his head. "What's wrong with that?"

Anakin's scowl deepened. "I don't."

"But...you're never happy. Won't the mind-healers help with that?"

This time Anakin couldn't help but be a little wistful at the boy's naivete. Such a simple outlook. It was both painful and refreshing. At

times he wished he could still have that view of life. Then he remembered where a similar view had gotten him at that age and dismissed the thought ruthlessly.

"Some people don't deserve to be happy," he heard himself answer, a little surprised at the words and more surprised that he meant them.

It was Hale's turn to frown. "Why not?"

Anakin smiled sadly. "Because of what they've done." *Like destroy everyone around me and corrupt everything I touch.*

"But as Jedi we can't be upset at those people. We're supposed to let those kinds of feelings go to the Force."

"I wish it were that simple," the former Sith muttered.

"I don't understand," the other boy said after a few minutes. "You want us to be happy, but how can you help other people be happy if you can't help yourself?"

These amazingly insightful questions were getting progressively more difficult to answer, mainly because Anakin normally tended to avoid these lines of thinking. He was contemplating a response to this, and had been for a few minutes (Hale was surprisingly patient for a child his age) when distraction came in the form of Maelee running up to them.

"There you two are! It's almost time for class. Let's go!"

Anakin checked his chrono and found, rather surprisingly, that the time had indeed gotten away from him. He couldn't be more grateful for the interruption though. He did notice that Hale still seemed concerned and even a bit protective for the rest of the day. He found the gesture endearing to a small extent, even if the motion was rather pointless.

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Anakin forced himself to sit quietly, hands gripping each other tightly and unable to banish the nervousness from his face completely. He was about to attend his first therapy session and he would be meeting with both of his mind-healers.

He ground his teeth at the recent revelation. He'd found out that morning that the Council, in all its paranoid glory, had decided to

assign him two mind-healers. *Two! Plus* the droid! Just how crazy did the Jedi think he was?! They had to believe that the Dark Side drove a person completely and utterly insane. They were right, of course (well, to an extent), but it still grated on his nerves. He was, more or less, fine now. He'd gotten over almost all of his problems with his childhood slavery years ago! And it wasn't like they—or anyone really—could help him with his more current and pressing psychological problems. Still, he had to put up with this (rather extreme) turn of events to continue with the Jedi, no matter how uncomfortable and useless he found it. This was, after all, still the best place for him to make the greatest difference.

The first mind-healer would come from the Temple. She was a master named Tai'k Xio and Anakin had looked her up in the archives as soon as he'd heard her name. She was an older human who seemed to like to wear her silver hair tied back in a neat woven braid to keep the long strands out of her light gray eyes. Both features contrasted greatly with her somewhat darker toned skin. She had her share of wrinkles, but for the most part age had treated her well and she seemed like she had a good many years left to her. Despite her appearance, Anakin wasn't sure about her life expectancy. He didn't remember her at all, so he somehow doubted she made it to the war.

The second mind-healer was a drall, and Anakin didn't know his name yet. He wasn't Force sensitive in the slightest and would come to the Temple from his office once a week. He had degrees in the psychology of sixteen different species, specializing in child psychology for most of those species, and tended to take on clients with particularly difficult backgrounds.

Anakin was surprised (and a little annoyed) they hadn't gotten another human to help with his supposed psychological problems. He'd come across drall before as both Anakin and Vader. Most people liked to describe the species as 'cute'. Anakin had described them as furry pains. The drall descended from burrowing mammals, lived on a planet in the Corillian system, and were highly intelligent. Those that Anakin had met tended to use their diminutive size and appearance to their advantage because many other species underestimated them. The former Sith knew better. They were cunning and planned their situations out carefully and they could be just as ruthless as any other species if they had to be. They also took their duties very seriously and he had no doubt this drall would be a good mind-healer...for anyone else. He still just didn't know why a second healer was needed in this case. Or a first, for that matter.

Annoyed at the entire situation, he took a deep breath and let it out, imagining all of his anger and frustration being released into the Force. The only thing about his current circumstance that seemed to help calm him down at this point was the fact that the Council only knew that he'd grown up as an indentured servant and had lived most of his recent life as one. They also knew he had some Dark Side training (but they had informed him that it would be his duty to tell his mind-healers of that as they seemed to take their oath to not reveal that seriously...for once). Of course that also created a bit of a sore point as now he had to act like they would expect him to—like a 9-year old, recently-freed slave with some basic Force training.

Then, of course, there was the puzzling question of why the Council had insisted on this to begin with. Why hadn't they gotten him the help he needed the first time around, when it may have actually helped? Why now? He suspected it had something to do with the fact that he didn't have a master this time. Also, they hadn't exactly been the most supportive of him even being a Jedi in his previous life. Of course it wouldn't have actually occurred to them that he might need some sort of support besides a broken, grieving master. He almost snorted aloud. His former master, who had only taken Anakin on out of some misplaced sense of honor to carry on Qui-gon's legacy.

Stupid Council members sitting around with sticks shoved so far up their backside that they'd have to be surgically removed.

Anakin paused at the thought, almost mentally leaping at the distraction. That strange sense of sarcasm had begun to show its head again. Some remnant from his time with Obi-wan, perhaps? Whether it was or not, Anakin thought he was beginning to finally understand his former master's sense of humor. He'd already suspected that Obi-wan's sarcasm was his coping mechanism. Add a sense of humor into the situation and it made everything that much easier to handle. Now he'd begun to realize just how much Obi-wan had clung to that mechanism just to get through a day, if Anakin's own experience was anything to go by. He'd also begun to suspect that Obi-wan hadn't ever been altogether 'whole' even years after Qui-gon's loss.

He shook his head and glanced at the door he was waiting beside. He'd been to this part of the Temple a few times before, but he was no where nearly as familiar with it as he was with most of the rest of the structure. He'd just never had much reason to come to this area, as it was part of the healer's wing and he'd avoided staying there as much as he possibly could. Like most of the rest of the Temple, it was simple but elegant with the stone-like pattern in earth tones across the floor

and similar, lighter tones for the walls. It felt very professional, but homey and welcoming. Anakin found he liked it very much—well, at least more than the buildings he'd been used to before his time traveling back.

When he'd been the Emperor's second in command, he'd had more than his share of (mostly unused) estates. He'd frequented the halls of the Imperial palace as well. Almost all of the structures he'd visited had a harsh, simple decor in shades of gray ranging from fairly light to midnight black. Then his own life-support chamber, or Qabbrat**,** had been a harsh white inside and he'd liked the contrast to the darkness that seemed to make up the rest of his life. It had still been a rather dramatic difference that did not encourage calm, but he hadn't cared for relaxation or peace at the time.

A whooshing sound drew him from his thoughts, causing him to look up at the door just in time to see Master Xio exit the room and smile down at him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting out here, Anakin," she said in a warm, soft voice. "We're ready to start now."

Anakin nodded, feeling that there was an undertone he'd missed but deciding that it didn't really matter at the moment. As confidently as he could, he straightened his shoulders and followed her back into the room. It was rather plain, he noticed, with cream-colored walls and a lightly tanned carpet. Nothing hung from the walls and the little sitting area had a couch and two or three arm chairs, all in shades of brown. Two small side-tables sat next to two of the arm chairs, one of which held the drall. The mouse-like creature smiled over at them, nose and whiskers twitching, as they entered, but didn't speak.

Master Xio took a seat in the other chair near a table and picked up a data pad that had been lying on top of it. She then gestured for Anakin to sit down after noting that he hadn't done so. He glanced at the couch and then at the chair and chose that one. He sat stiffly, making sure his feet were still touching the ground as he eyed the other two sentients warily.

"Alright, Anakin, you probably know who we are, but we want to introduce ourselves anyway," the drall said slowly, eyes darting over to look at Master Xio for just a moment before returning to Anakin. "My name is Girth and you're more than welcome to call me by that name."

The former Sith didn't so much as allow a muscle on his face to twitch. "Do you have a clan name?" he asked. Girth looked a little surprised that Anakin knew enough about his culture to realize that dralls still tended to identify with one of many clans and the name could (and often would) change whenever one drall family moved to another area.*

"I don't relate to a clan currently, no," he responded honestly.

"Mr. Girth, then," Anakin said with an acknowledging nod.

The fur-covered being snickered in a high, squeaking tone that held no malice whatsoever. "Just 'Girth' is fine."

"And I am Master Tai'k Xio," the Jedi said, introducing herself with that same, warm smile she'd greeted Anakin with. She looked genuine and he felt true interest and concern through the Force, although there seemed to be a touch of tension towards Girth. Judging from their reactions, they were coping with the strange situation as best they could, but disagreed on some point. It didn't seem to be anything truly major and they also seemed to have come to some sort of middle ground concerning the issue. Neither one of them gave off anything that didn't feel genuine.

"Master Xio," Anakin said with a stiff but respectful nod in her direction.

"We would like to let you know what we plan on doing and why you will be meeting with both of us," Master Xio said, obviously sensing Anakin's anxiety and deciding to cut to the chase. "I was asked by the Council to help you adjust to life in the Temple, but I felt I wasn't quite sufficient for the job. You see, I was raised in the Temple, and most if not all of the Jedi I help were raised in the Temple as well. As you weren't, I didn't feel that I could adequately meet all of your needs, so I asked that we bring on another mind-healer, someone who would know better how you grew up and how to work with you on that front."

At this point she nodded over to Girth who nodded back with a smile and took up the narration. "I'll admit I was rather surprised when the Jedi contacted me, but once I heard about your case I was more than happy to come and lend a hand."

Anakin kept his emotional mask in place and nodded. He didn't doubt the rodent-like being was curious, and the chance to work with Jedi like this did not come often, so of course the drall would have jumped

at the opportunity. Anakin, rather cynically, wondered how much helping a Jedi—even a young one—would boost Girth's reputation in the field of psychology. He also bet that the Temple was paying out a pretty credit for this and figured it had something to do with the drall's enthusiasm.

"As such," Girth continued, "I am here to help with anything related to your past and your relationships with the people you used to know."

Anakin immediately came to the conclusion that this entire farce would be completely and utterly useless. He would not tell some stranger about his relationships. Those were far too precious to him to just broadcast. Besides, how was he supposed to tell the man about his wife and adult-aged son (and the daughter he'd never met**)? Or about Palpatine's machinations? Or about his complicated feelings towards Obi-wan?

At that point, Master Xio cut in graciously. "And I will be here to answer any questions about the Temple, Jedi in particular, the Force, what will be expected of you and what you expect from the Jedi. Once a month, all three of us will meet to try and find common ground between your previous life and your future life here at the Temple.

"Does this make sense?"

Anakin looked back and forth between the two for a moment before nodding. "I understand."

"Excellent. Do you have any questions?"

"What if I can't tell you everything?" he asked slowly, hating that he had to be so blunt. Already that question felt too open, but it seemed like something a traumatized 9-year-old would say...right? Besides, he'd already decided to try and be more honest. If he admitted he was holding something back, the Council and other Jedi might trust him a little more.

Girth and Master Xio exchanged glances.

"We will be asking you hard questions," Master Xio said slowly. "Many of them may not be pleasant to answer, but in the long run they will help."

"We will also be giving you exercises that should help you adjust," Girth said, his tone soft and pleasant, although Anakin caught a slight frown from Master Xio, but it was gone almost as soon as it had

appeared. "And we will assign you homework that you will be required to fulfill."

Anakin was liking the sound of this less and less.

"What kind of homework?" he asked.

"Mainly assignments that will help you connect to other people and be more comfortable when you interact with them," the drall clarified. "Also we will be assigning you topics to discuss with the droid. You are free to discuss whatever you wish with the droid, of course, but the topics we suggest are those we believe will be most beneficial to your mental health."

"Know that we will never outright force you, Anakin," Master Xio said soothingly. "We would like you to trust us, but if you feel you can't talk to us, then we would like you to talk to the droid. It will be able to interact with you and has been programmed to respond as a mind-healer might, but please keep in mind that it is only a droid and treat what you tell it as such. It will not have feelings to hurt."

He nodded in understanding. Basically she meant that the droid wasn't a person and wouldn't be able to react as one. He actually rather liked that idea.

"Also we want to reiterate that your sessions with us may be recorded if you allow it, but your sessions with the droid will not be by anyone or anything other than the droid," Master Xio continued. "We will give you a memory chip at the beginning of every session. You can do what you will with those chips, but we do encourage you to keep them."

Anakin doubted there would be much on those 'chips' to keep. This was ridiculous. He wondered what kinds of specs the droid had and was looking forward to his sessions with the thing just so he could tinker with it. That would undoubtedly be the best and most productive thing to come from this entire arrangement.

Still, he wasn't about to tell them that.

"Yes Master, Sir," he nodded to each of them respectively. "Thank you."

"We won't require a session from you today," Girth spoke up, seeming all too happy, especially with another frown from Master Xio. It seemed she wanted to get started straight away, but the drall had somehow talked her out of it. His respect for Girth went up several

notches. If he could hold his own against a Jedi Master then he deserved it. Still didn't mean Anakin would trust him with anything, but he could appreciate the being's obviously steadfast nature.

"We would, however, like to introduce the droid to you," Master Xio said. She waited for Anakin's nod before calling out. "D-40, could you please come here?"

A door near the back of the room opened and a protocol droid walked out. Anakin just blinked at it as it shuffled over towards them.

"It's a protocol droid," he said dryly, unable to keep his face clear of the unimpressed expression.

"Master Anakin," it said in a low, obviously female voice as it walked up to them. "I would like to inform you that I am indeed not just a protocol droid. I am PXRD-40, and my programming is far more extensive than any normal protocol droid. Instead of communication, etiquette or protocol, my functions mainly revolve around understanding human psychology as best a droid of my caliber can. I have the most recent upgrades and will fulfill these functions to the best of my abilities."

Anakin regarded it for several seconds before he had to suppress a smirk. Messing with this droid was going to be easier than he'd expected. He wondered what he should tinker with first. D-40 may not act like a protocol droid at the moment, it was far too rude (he could almost hear his own old protocol droid complaining about D-40's lack of manners), but he could most definitely change that. He wondered how the droid would cope with only being able to speak in Sullestian until their next meeting. Perhaps he could make a list of creative languages?

"D-40," he acknowledged, proud of himself for keeping his face completely straight. He really was still far too used to hiding behind that blasted mask.

"Well, seeing as we've all been introduced," Girth said, "we're basically done for the day. Unless Master Xio has anything to add, we'll dismiss you early today."

Master Xio smiled at Anakin and nodded. "Your first session with me will be next week on the third day at this time, alright?"

No, no it wasn't alright. This was a waste of time at best. But he spoke up none the less. "Yes, Master," he said as he got to his feet and

bowed. "And you Girth, sir. I shall take my leave now."

With that, he calmly walked out of the room and turned to head for the lightsaber training areas. He really needed to take his frustration at the whole situation out on something.

xXx

Girth of the drall watched his newest project walk out the door, refusing to let his smile drop until the door had quite firmly closed behind the boy. He and the Jedi Master sat in silence for several seconds before he spoke up.

"You said he was mature for his age. I think that's a bit of an understatement."

The Jedi Master acknowledged that with a sardonic chuckle.

"He's also hiding something from us."

Master Xio sighed. "I agree. He even said as much, but I know little more than you. The Council refuses to give us any more information, on his request," she nodded towards the door.

"And he doesn't seem to see this arrangement as anything productive," Girth continued with a frown and looked over at his fellow mind-healer for the first time. "We can't help him if he doesn't want to be helped."

Master Xio frowned. "Yes, I know. I believe that will be the first barrier we need to address. We will need to help him see how necessary this is."

"He does seem fairly well adjusted already," the drall pointed out.

"The Council doesn't agree," Master Xio said. "And neither do I. There's just...something there." She sighed. "I don't think I can explain it."

The drall nodded. "I'm guessing that's just something I'll have to get used to," he remarked with a grin, his whiskers twitching in amusement. Then he looked back at the door and frowned. "I haven't changed my mind. I think the best way to approach this is to help him accept his background and learn to let it go."

Master Xio frowned again. "We teach every initiate to 'let go' and I still believe you will be wasting your time."

"Releasing one's feelings to the Force as you explained it to me is all well and good," the drall conceded, "but it doesn't root out the problem. It doesn't address the source of the emotions."

"And I believe that it does. This is something you will simply be unable to understand."

Girth shrugged. "Perhaps so, but I will remain adamant until proven otherwise."

"As you wish," Master Xio said nonchalantly. Girth could tell that she was annoyed but would humor him and appreciated the gesture. He found it interesting that a Jedi of her caliber would take such offense to his suggested method of treatment. She seemed to think that by teaching Anakin how to acknowledge and deal with his feelings as a normal human would, he was saying that their methods were somehow inadequate. He hadn't realized that the Jedi were so ingrained in their traditions. It made sense, though, when he thought about it. Still it brought a note of worry to his mind. Following traditions for the sake of following traditions rarely left room for healthy growth and change. He could see the sense of following ideals that had upheld the Jedi Order for centuries, but it still seemed like a recipe for even more problems than those he and master Xio had already discussed.

Shaking the thought from his head, he looked directly at the Jedi Master and cocked his head. "Our goals are to help him adjust to the temple's lifestyle and to help heal any damage that may have been done by his slavery. I will warn you that, depending on the slave's master, healing that damage can be anything from difficult to nigh-impossible. Some of what those slaves are forced to do..." he faded off with a shudder that shook his whole frame and caused his whiskers to twitch again.

"Yes," Master Xio said neutrally. "I have been unfortunate enough to witness many such despicable acts with my own eyes. And I suspect that some have been forced into even worse than that."

The drall nodded and sighed. "Yes. I agree. I just want to make sure that the Council knows this. I think that if he is as damaged as you suspect that this will be a rather...long-term project."

The woman suddenly shot her comrade a glare. "He is not simply 'a project'. He is a little boy who needs help."

Girth sighed again. "I find it easier to be objective when I distance

myself from the people I help treat. I do not mean to offend, and I gave my word that I will do what is in Anakin's best interest. I will not go back on that promise."

Master Xio regarded him for a few moments before nodding. "I asked for your help in this not just because of your success rate, but because I felt that I needed someone with a different view to give him the optimal amount of support and healing. I don't expect to agree with you on everything, but I do not necessarily see that as negative."

The drall felt a smile come to his lips. "Master Xio, I could not agree more. I am looking forward to your point of view on this. I've never really been able to study anything from the viewpoint of a Jedi before. I fully expect to find many areas where we do not agree, and I do not find that distasteful in the slightest."

The Jedi returned his smile. "Indeed."

xXx

Anakin did not like the fact that his escapades from the temple still felt like escapes. He would always enjoy the thrill of pulling something off that shouldn't be possible, even small things like getting out of and back into the temple unnoticed, but that was the only thing he found enjoyable about his general mind set at the moment.

He'd always felt the Jedi held him back, and had despised them for it. Now, after he had lead an entire fleet of star ships and a veritable army, he understood more. He'd been so selfish and focused on himself and his own growth as a teenager and young adult. Part of that he chalked up to Palpatine and his manipulations, but he hadn't had to manipulate much, really. He could see now that the Jedi had simply wanted him to grow in other ways and had tried to reign in the impulses that tended to be more destructive.

Even knowing all of that, he still felt that leaving the Temple brought a freedom that he reveled in. Out here, walking around on glorified stilts and with his arms long and dragging, he felt like a completely different being—like there was nothing in the world holding him down. No prophecy, no Jedi, no Sith, and especially no false, child-like identity that he had to try and maintain.

He knew it wasn't real, and that the weight of the galaxy rested on his shoulders now more than ever if anything, but for a few moments, he could imagine that he was just a normal, average, every-day sentient just trying to make his way in the universe, and he loved it. More and

more the idea of being a non-entity seemed appealing lately. He desperately wished he could be someone who could leave all of this behind, go off and marry Padme, raise his children and just live his life...but realistically he knew that he wouldn't like such a boring lifestyle either, no matter how attractive it seemed. He doubted he'd be able to live without getting involved in galactic events somehow.

With a sigh, Anakin pulled himself back to the task at hand and looked at the diner at the end of the walkway. Right now he didn't have time or room for such indulgent thoughts. He had a Count to convince and a rather painful discussion to have. He'd already decided that the best manner to approach this would be to give the man the truth. If he knew exactly what he was getting in to, Anakin doubted he'd turn. At least, he hoped not. After all, if he'd known...

Pushing his thoughts and daydreams to the back of his mind, he moved forward, double-checking his extended, mechanical limbs for the last time. He was confident enough with them that he felt positive that he could pull this off.

He had to.

Steeling himself, he opened the door and walked inside Didi's Cafe.***

Chapter End Notes

*I have no idea if this is canon, I really just made it up. There wasn't much about dralls on the wiki.

**Most fan-fics I come across all have Vader knowing about Leia being his daughter. Canon, however, only states that he realized that Luke had a twin sister, not who she was. I don't think he really had time to figure it out before he died. He never once referred to Luke's sister by her true name or title in RotJ, so yes, I'm putting in here that he didn't know he'd ever met her. Now I will say that if he sat down and thought about it, he'd probably be able to realize just who she was, but he never has—and that's part of his problem, he doesn't work out his issues, which is the whole point of the therapy to begin with.

***Dex's Diner before it became Dex's Diner. It was owned by a man named Didi at this time.

Author's Note: Someone commented that in canon there is no 'Light Side' of the Force. There is only 'The Force' and 'The Dark Side'. However, when I looked it up on Wookiepedia, it described

two sides to the Force: The Bogan aka the Dark Side and the Ashla. Now we could argue that the Ashla is simply the 'Force' they spoke of, but it said it was in opposition to the Bogan and that they were both part of a whole. As such, I will continue to differentiate between the 'light side' and the 'dark side'. However, you have given me an idea...;) So thanks.

Note 2: Another one of my awesome readers suggested that I should give Dooku a first name. I would like to, but I want this to be as close to canon as possible, so until I can get a canon name, I'm going to continue to call him by his title of "Count Dooku", even in internal monologue.

Note 3: Thanks again to Batfan7. I couldn't ask for a more helpful beta. :D

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As a general rule, Sith don't tend to take frustration well. Sidious had always been different in that particular respect. He prided himself on his accomplishments as a Sith while not allowing the Dark Side to control him. In his opinion, too many Sith had fallen into that trap, and he would not allow himself to become nothing more than a mere puppet.

However, current circumstances were trying his resolve. Intensely. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to unleash his full anger on the galaxy. Anyone with less discipline (which consisted of most of the universe) would have done so already.

It had all started with the initiation of his and his master's plan—the Trade Federation blockade on Naboo. Everything had gone so well, until the little wench of a Queen hadn't given into their plans. He'd gone ahead and removed Plageus from the equation, and he refused to second guess himself on that account, but he had to admit that everything had gone wrong since that moment. He'd lost his own apprentice (no great loss, but still a large inconvenience) to a Jedi Padawan of all people, and then all of his plans had come to a stand still. He hadn't been elected Chancellor (and Valorem had undoubtedly found out about his maneuvering because he seemed particularly wary of Palpatine now), he hadn't managed to get the Brat-queen killed, and although his standing in the Senate had indeed been strengthened, nothing had come of it.

To make matters worse, he could not seem to get hold of Dooku. If he didn't know any better, he'd think the man was avoiding him...which made absolutely no sense at all. He'd dropped a few hints here and there, but it almost seemed that the man had given up his search for the Sith. The idea of the former Jedi simply giving up after he'd gone so far as to leave the Jedi Order went against everything Sidious knew about the man's personality.

As he sat and contemplated his situation in his senatorial office, he couldn't help but clench his fists in an attempt to keep his anger and frustration at the entire situation under control. He couldn't afford to give up his discipline now. Not with his proximity to the Jedi. And it

seemed that Dooku had come to Courscant as well. No, he couldn't afford to even come close to giving away any clues as to his real identity.

But why had Dooku come back? None of his spies had reported him coming even close to the Jedi Temple. No, he'd simply gone to a high-class hotel and hadn't so much as called anyone, let alone left his accommodations for any reason.

A new thought suddenly entered his mind, causing him to frown. Had Dooku come into contact with Sidious' other project...with Darth Vader? The Sith he had some sort of unexplainable connection to? The Sith he *could not* seem to find *despite* that connection? As if to tease him, the dark power had shown himself and then vanished. Now he could find absolutely *no trace* of the man who fit the images he'd torn from the assassin's head. Every possible lead he'd had on the presence had come to naught. Had Dooku somehow found a lead and thought Vader was the Sith he'd been searching for?

The implications caused both an iceberg of dread and a fire of anticipation to form in Sidious' stomach. While he may very well lose Dooku to the new power if that were so, it could also completely throw just about everyone off of his trail (not that anyone had found anything that could possibly tie him to the ambiguous Sith Lord they now knew existed, but still...). He hated the idea of hiding again, but loved the idea of blindsiding his enemies in the future. If the Jedi found Vader and pinned everything Sidious and Plageus had initiated on him...

If Dooku had not stumbled across the new, Palpatine would do just about everything in his power to get him to do so. Everything could only work out in Sidious' favor in that case. If he couldn't turn Dooku, it could drive Vader to Sidious and he would have his apprentice. If Vader could turn Dooku, Sidious would have all that more insulation between his enemies and himself. And then, if Dooku somehow managed to kill Vader, he would be ripe for the picking.

Perhaps the situation would work itself out, then.

Sidious frowned and examined that thought again. No, he was missing something. No situation ever completely worked itself out. Not in his (rather considerable) experience.

Still, he'd been patient up until this point. His ability to wait and act at just the right moment hadn't failed him yet. He would keep an eye

on developments. Until then, he had some new plans to work out.

If Vader was on Courscant, it was only a matter of time until their paths crossed, after all.

xXx

Luke came right on time, and Dooku couldn't help but be a little surprised when he saw the rest of the masked figure's body. The being was lanky and had a loping gait that belied great speed, although it seemed somewhat clumsy. He could, however, already feel a power through the Force coming from the being that hinted at amazing potential coupled with incredible control.

Yes, he could see this sentient as a Sith apprentice.

The being saw him sitting in one of the more private booths towards the back of the cafe and headed directly towards him. Dooku had no doubt that Luke had scoped the entire area previously and suspected that the former Sith's nonchalance was nothing more than a mask as false as the one he wore over his face.

The Count didn't get up to greet him, instead giving him a nod and then watching silently as Luke slid into the seat across from him and waited patiently.

"So we finally meet," Luke said, his voice sounding sardonic through the vocal distortion.

"We do," Dooku agreed as he studied the being before him intensely. "You have mechanical limbs," he pointed out after a minute.

Luke shifted awkwardly. "I do."

The count raised his eyebrow when the being didn't continue. After a few more minutes of uncomfortable silence, Luke seemed to decide he could tell Dooku more. "My right arm was severed when I fought a Sith...another apprentice of Sidious." Luke paused and Dooku couldn't tell if the weight he felt behind that silence was significant or not.. This being had very good shields. "That was before I...turned. After I fell and took a Sith name, a Jedi fought me and severed my other arm and my legs when I made an error in judgment."

Dooku wasn't impressed. The creature that killed Qui-gon had been a master of the saber arts. This former Sith must not have been very good at his craft if he'd lost all four of his limbs like that. No wonder

he'd run. The Sith from the planet would have undoubtedly destroyed him otherwise. He felt a derisive pang of disgust towards the cowardly being before him. Why should he trust such a being or believe that anything he said was true?

"I see," he said finally.

Luke must have sensed his annoyance. "No, I don't think you do," he said, his voice suddenly cold.

The being hesitated for a few moments, probably gathering himself, before speaking up. "Have you ever brushed the Dark Side? Touched it at all, willingly or not?"

"No," Dooku said. Not to his memory in any case.

The former Sith leaned back against the seat. "The power rush is...intoxicating," Luke said with a strange tone in his voice. Dooku could hear both love and disgust as well as hints of both longing and revulsion. It surprised and troubled the former Jedi because he'd heard that tone before.

During his time as a Jedi, Dooku had run across a myriad of people. In the fallacy of his youth, he'd wanted to label them all; simply place them in a category and be done with it. He'd had little patience for others and, if he were truthful with himself, it was still something he worked on curbing as he had that tendency to this day. As a padawan, those sentients that had disgusted him the most had been the drug addicts. Spice, Death Sticks...even the mere idea of any substance that caused severe dependence almost sickened him. Of them, Death Stick addiction tended to be the hardest one to overcome because as a general rule, the addiction was immediate and the cravings for them never lessened in intensity.

As a padawan, Dooku tended to avoid or look down on anyone who'd had an addiction in their life. He'd changed his opinion after meeting a young, single mother while on a mission with Yoda. She'd given them some information on a local crime lord who they'd suspected had been involved with several recent assassination attempts on a man in the local government who had asked the Jedi for help. When they'd asked how she knew this information, she'd reluctantly admitted that she was a recovering addict who used to buy from the crime lord's syndicate. To this day, he'd remembered how shocked he'd felt when Yoda had told the woman how strong she was without a hint of deception.

At the time, it had boggled his mind. How could such a weak-willed person—one who would get attached to such substances for a few hours of escape—earn his master's respect? When he'd confronted Yoda, the little alien had admonished him for judging too harshly. 'Many kinds of strength, are there, young padawan,' he'd said. 'Resist their own desires every day as she does, most Jedi could not. To be honored and acknowledged that strength should be.' He'd quickly dismissed the subject after that and hadn't offered any more thought on it, but after some thought and meditation, Dooku had come to see his point.

Luke spoke of the Dark Side like that woman had spoken of her drugs. It was thought provoking to say the least and he felt his disapproval of the former Sith begin to vanish.

After several seconds of silent reflection, the being continued. "Anyone using the Dark Side can still think as they could before, but the thought process is heavily influenced." He shook his head regretfully. "You don't even realize you're being influenced. You're imbued by the sudden power you're experiencing and the control you feel you have and regardless of the truth, you believe with your whole soul that no one can stand up to you. It is only after I returned to the light that I realized that the control I had experienced was a lie because for so long, the Dark Side had controlled me, not the other way around."

He paused for a moment before shaking his head again and redirecting his gaze to Dooku as if he suddenly realized where he was. Dooku noted his lack of focus for a trained Force user, but dismissed it for the moment as he listened to the other person's experience.

"My opponent was a gifted fighter, patient and determined even in the face of my onslaught. We fought and he managed to maneuver himself into gaining the higher ground. However, in my deluded state, I continued the battle. He cut off my remaining arm and leg."

The Count nodded, but frowned. "Why tell me this?"

Luke shrugged. "You wanted to know and I see no reason to keep it from you."

"It is obviously a painful subject."

Another shrug. "Most of my memories as a Sith are."

"Hmm," Dooku said thoughtfully. He was curious and wanted to press for more information, but he also wanted to address his original

questions, so he changed the subject.

"Who is S—" he cut off as Luke raised his hand in a fast, cut-off motion.

"Do not speak that name here. You and I both know who we are speaking of."

Dooku didn't see the harm in mentioning a name but the people who could be found at the Cafe weren't exactly always trustworthy. Dooku knew he wasn't in any danger here, but slinging around even the name of a Sith in general conversation wasn't exactly the wisest idea, so he conceded the point. He wasn't worried about the information getting out, per se, and apparently Luke wouldn't be too upset if their general conversation was overheard or he would have recommended somewhere else. That didn't mean they shouldn't be at least somewhat cautious.

"Before I answer that question, perhaps I should answer your other one, regarding the Sith Order?" Oh, so he could say that aloud but not Sidious' name? Dooku's frown deepened. He wanted an answer to his question, and the constant diversions were quickly building on his last nerve. Still, he'd gotten a fair amount of information from the former Sith, and the Count would be lying if he said he didn't find it fascinating, so he decided to continue to humor Luke and allowed the diversion by stating his own point.

"Very well. I do not understand how an order that was corrupt from the beginning can be corrupted."

Luke sighed. "You're not wholly wrong. Do you know how the Order was founded?"

Dooku frowned. "A little." Very little, actually. There wasn't a whole lot about it on the holocrons in the temple. The few Sith holocrons they'd managed to come across apparently had very little information as well, although Dooku had never taken a look for himself.

The other being regarded him for a moment before speaking. "The Sith Order was created by a band of exiled Jedi who used the Dark Side. They found a humanoid race called 'The Sith' whose worship centered around the Dark Side. They subdued the race and made themselves lords over them for all intents and purposes. They then merged their own beliefs with the planet's culture, adopting many of the race's customs while working their own teachings into the Sith's religion. That is where a good deal of the actual philosophy comes from."

Fascinating. Dooku didn't interrupt, silently encouraging Luke to continue, which he did. "The Dark Jedi who would later become the Sith Overlords, made their code in direct opposition to Jedi. Anything that works in opposition to something simply to be opposing will never be correct. Do you happen to know the Sith Code?"

Yes. He'd heard it once or twice, although he'd never actively studied it. But the way Luke leaned forward stopped him from repeating what he could remember of it. "It seems you will enlighten me either way."

The sentient shrugged. "*'Peace is a Lie, there is only passion,'* is the first line. Does that not sound familiar?"

Dooku scowled and raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Luke took the hint and went on.

"'*Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.*'"

"I have heard it before."

The being shrugged. "Perhaps. But few people realize that there is a great deal of truth in those statements mixed in with the lies. *He* used to say that a believable lie depends on one's skill to make it just true enough to twist reality.

"Why do I believe the Sith Order is corrupt? Because Peace is not a lie. I will also say that when I was in service to the Dark Side, I was continually bound down by the figurative chains of the consequences of my decisions." He opened his hand and gazed at the palm of it, although Dooku doubted he actually saw it.

After a few moments he seemed to come back to himself because his fingers closed into a fist and he glanced rather suddenly back at his current companion. "The rest of it is true, more or less, but those two lines I can't agree with, at least not in the context."

"You've been implying that the Sith Order has changed over time, corrupting itself from its original focus. If the Sith are still preaching this same mantra as they have from the beginning, how can it then be corrupt?

Luke shook his head slowly as if to say 'you're not getting it'. Dooku frowned, arms tightening across his chest in agitation the slightest bit. "Just because something started corrupt doesn't mean there isn't any

truth to it. The problem I came across in my own studies is this: If the Sith set themselves up as opposing the Jedi, but they have truth in their original beliefs, does that not suggest that the Jedi themselves believe at least some lies?

"For instance, the original Jedi code acknowledges far more than the current translation—*Emotion, yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony. Death, yet the Force.* Somewhere in history, the Jedi changed their goals of balance to those of comfort and apathy. The Sith may not have started out with the purest beliefs, but their original ultimate goal was freedom; an ideal that most sentient beings strive for even today. Both orders have changed, and not for the better, I fear. For the Sith Order, what few changes have been made don't seem to help with the ultimate goal of setting one free, so yes, I do believe they are just as corrupt as the Jedi in their own way."

Dooku raised an eyebrow again. "Are you suggesting that they simply lost sight of their goals?"

Luke snorted under his mask. Well, at least he seemed he had a nose. "Yes, although, as I said, they didn't have a particularly clear sight to begin with. They were angry, frustrated, and on the run. And remember, the Dark Side doesn't just cloud one's thoughts, it twists them to a point where the user doesn't even realize their thoughts are twisted. Their rather illogical logic suddenly makes perfect sense. All that the Dark Jedi had on their minds at the time was their anger and hatred towards the Jedi who had rejected them. So while they could still think logically about actions and events and what physical consequences could come of them, and while they still had their own core beliefs to spur them on, they couldn't see the price they were paying. When they started their order, they were focused on rebelling against their former beliefs and most of them had been driven power mad.

"That's what makes *him* so dangerous. He's the most level-headed Sith in the entire history of them." Dooku noted that he'd said 'them', not 'us'. He really didn't consider himself a darksider any more. How utterly bizarre and quite impressive. "Either that or the most utterly mad of all of them. I can't decide which," Luke admitted bitterly.

Dooku watched the being for a few moments in contemplation. Apparently, at least at one time, there had been more than a master/apprentice relationship between this (former) Sith and his master, at least on Luke's side. His actions seemed more reminiscent of one who

had accepted some perceived betrayal of trust than one who had simply seen the error of his ways. Or, Dooku admitted to himself, he could be reading a little too much into it.

He noted this, but either way, he didn't particularly care. It was high time they got the conversation back on track anyway.

"And speaking of '*him*'..." the Count said as he leaned forward with a pointed expression.

Luke turned his attention to studying Dooku for a few moments. "Before I tell you what you wish to know, I want your word that you will not confront him as of yet. Gather whatever evidence you feel is necessary, but do not approach the man." Dooku frowned ever so slightly, but he could see the wisdom in the other's words, even if he only saw it as another exasperating stall.

"Very well," he said with a nod. "You have my word."

The former Sith seemed to watch him for just a few moments longer before he nodded, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

"The Dark Lord of the Sith is none other than the Senator Palpatine."

Dooku stared in shock. "What?!" he asked.

"Keep your voice down," the sentient before him growled.

"That cannot be true!"

"Why not?" Luke asked, sitting back and folding his arms across his small chest.

"The Jedi would know! I have met with the man himself! I would even consider him a friend!" Dooku replied heatedly, although he did make a conscious effort to keep his voice down. No one should be able to hear him outside of the room-like booth they'd been seated at, but there was no point in being reckless.

Luke snorted derisively. "Then you are almost as great a fool as I," he muttered.

"It cannot be. You are deliberately misleading me!" Dooku insisted. "Tell me who he is!"

Luke leaned back and regarded him for a moment before he seemed to deflate. "The Sith are masters of deception. He has spent a good deal

of his life focusing on hiding his Force presence for this very goal of deceiving the Jedi and the Senate."

"And how do I know *you* are not deceiving me?" Dooku challenged, still unable to comprehend that Senator Palpatine could possibly be anything other than a man—a very cunning and ambitious man, but simply a man none the less. A good man, from what Dooku could see. Although there always had been something about him...

He shook the thought from his head. It simply could not be.

"I am not," Luke stated simply in answer to his question. "I have no proof to offer you at this time , but I will give you a warning: If you choose to continue to investigate this, I am sure you will uncover things you are not meant to find. If you are discovered, you will likely not survive long enough to share what you have learned. This is a powerful man in every sense of the word. He does not traverse the darkness, he *is the darkness.* Death walks in *his* shadow." Luke paused again and Dooku found himself too conflicted to speak. "I will take my leave now, seeing as we have nothing more to discuss until you can either trust my advice or you find a way to confirm it."

He moved to stand, but The Count stopped him. "Wait! I am sure I will have more questions at some point. How do I contact you?"

Luke looked down at Dooku for a second before nodding and taking a scrap of flimsy and a writing utensil from his pocket, although when he spoke, his voice was tight. "Here is another cafe. When you wish to meet, post a time under this name on Didi's Cafe's Holo-net page. Put the day you wish to meet on after the name. Do so no more than two days in advance but give at least one day's notice." He pushed the flimsy over to Dooku. "Burn that as soon as you memorize it."

The count looked down at the note. It had the name of a cafe on it (one he was unfamiliar with) followed by 'Tyra'. A woman's name? Just how cautious could a person be? Of course, if he thought he was going up against one of the most powerful man in the Galaxy, perhaps even Luke's excessive caution wasn't unwarranted.

He looked up again just in time to see the being walk out the door and sat back, crumbling the flimsy in his hand. He'd keep his promise to burn it when it wouldn't cause a disturbance. A few moments later, the robotic waitress came by and Dooku instructed it to bring him his meal. He spent the rest of the evening contemplating his own security and deciding to invest in some upgrades. He still wasn't sure he could

trust Luke, but he couldn't afford not to at least look into this, and if he did so, he might not be as safe as he'd originally thought.

xXx

That had gone about as well as he could have expected, Anakin realized as he walked to the nearest air transport station that would take him back to the Temple. He gone to the meeting in hopes that he could sway Dooku to his side, but realistically realized that at this point, it just wouldn't be possible. Truthfully, he would be happy to settle for stopping Dooku from turning and joining Sidious. It would be nice to have someone outside the Temple he could rely on, but he knew he could never really trust the man, not after everything that had happened between them the first time.

Now he would just have to wait and see what Dooku did. He did not relish the thought. He hated waiting. Still, there was nothing for it.

That actually brought a new realization to mind. He'd finally gotten enough money to hire someone to start freeing slaves. He had someone in mind...a certain Bounty Hunter, if he could get hold of him. He was a bit worried as he didn't have the unlimited funds to ensure his loyalty, but then Anakin doubted he'd really need it at this point. It would just be a job, not even that high-profile. Besides, he knew the man in question had served his own time as a slave. It shouldn't be too difficult to—

Anakin didn't stop in his tracks, but he did pause for the barest moment. He was being followed. Dooku? No, he doubted it. It didn't hold with his current ethics and beliefs.

His heart suddenly froze. Sidious. It had to be. He would be watching Dooku at this point, so even if they hadn't heard anything that had happened in the diner (which he highly doubted as he'd had the place completely swept before Dooku had arrived and no one had even approached their booth), of course they would be curious about the person the former Jedi had come to Courscant to meet.

Ahead of him, he saw his air transport station come into view. As he approached, he gave it no heed and finally bypassed it completely. If Sidious' spies were following him he couldn't afford to go back towards the Temple. No, he'd have to lose his tail first. It shouldn't be that difficult...unless his follower decided to confront him.

Considering he'd bypassed just about every other point of transport he could have used, it was a possibility. That was one reason why Didi

had set his cafe up where he had: it was situated very closely to both upper and lower level access ways as well as transport stations of all kinds.

Of course.

Anakin swept the area for an exit point he could use. There weren't a lot of people around as it was an industrial area after hours, which made disappearing into a crowd far more difficult. This was looking less and less appealing.

He had just spotted a lift tube and was starting towards it when he heard a voice behind him.

"Hold it, pal. I know you know I'm here."

Anakin froze and looked around. Anyone else who had been in the vicinity was hurrying away and there wasn't anyone else around him. He couldn't fight with his mechanical limbs. He could make walking look natural enough (if clumsy), but there was simply no way he could really fight if the opponent were good.

Besides, he knew Sidious. If someone were confronting him now, there would be others to witness the altercation. He couldn't take them all out before one of them got away. That meant he had to avoid using the Force if at all possible.

Putting his hands up in a show of acknowledgment, he slowly turned around to face the person who had addressed him. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, or even what species as it seemed very large and was covered from head to foot in a strange conglomeration of armor and clothing. A bounty hunter then.

"You're not a thief," Anakin said pointedly, his voice dry. "So this isn't a mugging."

The being cocked its head. "I'm a collector of sorts," they said. "Mainly information."

Anakin shrugged his shoulders. "Then I don't have anything I can give you."

"Can't or won't?"

"I don't have anything to give," Anakin growled.

"I highly doubt that."

His frustration and fear rose again, and he tried desperately to reign them in before they turned to anger. The bounty hunter had to have some sort of leverage if he were this confident. Either that or Anakin had walked into an ambush.

Tentatively he stretched out with his senses, looking for other beings in the Force. He could sense focus and intensity, which would probably mean any such beings were focused on him...

There, on a neighboring building, and another on a walk way a quarter of a league away. One below him as well. Anakin had to admit that they were good as they had covered most angles.

"You see," the bounty hunter said, "I think you were meeting someone...and we want information on everyone that person meets."

"Why?" Anakin asked, although he already knew. The being may as well jump up and down and scream 'I work for Sidious', although Anakin doubted they knew who was paying their checks at the moment.

The bounty hunter scoffed. "Do you really expect me to answer that?"

Anakin shrugged again. "It was worth a try."

"Who are you?"

This time Anakin smirked. "You don't know?"

"Whether we do or don't isn't something you need to concern yourself about. Answer the question," the bounty hunter said, raising the blaster in its hand higher.

"Or what?" Anakin challenged, his voice still dry and unimpressed.

"Or my sniper friend takes you out and we find out in a more...personable environment."

They planned on kidnapping him if they had to, then. Probably would whether he answered them or not, but at least he could buy a few seconds. He had no doubt a sniper had their sights trained on him. He also doubted anyone would interfere in what looked like a confrontation between bounty hunters. No, he was on his own.

"Luke Lars," he said finally.

The being snorted. "Please. Your real name."

"How do you know that isn't my real name?"

"What kind of an information gatherer do you take me for?"

"Who do you think I am, then?" Anakin asked, intrigued despite himself.

The being shifted its weight cockily. "Does the name 'Vader' mean anything to you?"

Anakin felt the entirety of his body turn to carbonite. He couldn't help the shock and horror that rushed through him.

Funny how quickly shock can be turned into anger.

"How do you know that name?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

How could they possibly know that?! If they knew that then Palpatine knew that! But *HOW?!* There wasn't any *possible* way...wait...

The assassin on Naboo. Well, it seemed he knew who Sidious had tortured. But then, why wasn't Sidious after Anakin Skywalker? Why had he had his people confront 'Luke Lars' instead?

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," the bounty hunter said smugly.

"No," Anakin growled, his mechanical hands now in fists at his side. "I am not Vader."

"But you know who he is."

He felt the Dark Side whispering to him that he had the power to protect himself at his fingertips. All he had to do was reach out and take it. He could take them all so easily. After all, it didn't matter if he showed his Force Powers now. Palpatine already knew. He could break the neck of the man in front of him and then he could go after—

NO! He yelled silently at himself and took several deep breaths to try and bring calm. It didn't help much. Yet again he felt like a cornered animal. He couldn't answer any more questions. They'd be able to see right through him and in his current state of mind there was no possible way that he could even begin to deceive them.

So he did the only thing he could at the moment. He ran. Awkward or

not, he could at least do that, especially with the Force at his call. With a sniper (or several) in the equation he couldn't afford not to just get out of the situation at this point. Blaster fire shot after him and he reached out to the Force, deepening his connection and dodging and jumping where it told him to until he reached the edge of the walkway. Without so much as a hesitation, he dove over the railing (thankful that this bridge wasn't shielded like those higher up tended to be) and into a free fall towards Courscant's surface more than a league below.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry this took so long. I was sick (three times in three weeks!), my beta was sick, we both had other real life problems to deal with...yeah, you're kind of lucky you got this when you did. Hope you enjoyed it. *evil grin here* *Runs away cackling madly*
>
> Thanks again to Batfan7! Seriously I could NOT do this without her! :D

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Anakin leapt over the railing and soared past the edge of the walkway, he realized that he hadn't dodged quite as well as he'd hoped when he felt a searing bolt from a blaster enter his leg from behind. He grit his teeth against the pain. Right now, in the midst of an adrenalin rush it wouldn't be too difficult to ignore it, but he knew he would pay for it later. He wouldn't have gotten hit at all if it weren't for those infernal stilts.

More blaster fire came at him as he sped down and passed the sniper set up from below. He was able to avoid the blaster fire by pushing with the Force off of the sides of the buildings surrounding him. It wouldn't be too long until he was out of range...he just hoped that he wouldn't hit the ground before he could find a way out of this ambush.

With one mighty push at just the right angle, he shot in a southeast direction, causing his descent to fall into a blind spot for most of the bounty hunters and immediately put his hands and feet out to slow his descent. He was coming up on a traffic lane below...perfect.

Aiming for a transport, he pushed off of a building and angled his body in a precise trajectory, then reached out with the Force. Slowing himself as much as he could, he stretched out his arm and snagged the top of a passing airbus, wincing when, even with the give he'd factored into the extensions, it jerked his arm painfully enough to almost pop it out of joint. It was a nod to his prowess in mechanics and robotics that the mechanical hand didn't fall apart immediately. His body jerked forward and slapped against the back of the transport, probably alarming several people inside, but he paid the cries of distress no heed.

Reaching out with the Force again, he felt for followers. No one. They hadn't expected him to do that and so didn't have a speeder ready to follow. He thanked the Force for that. They wouldn't be too far behind, so he had to get off soon. Of course, that left a bit of a problem as he didn't have anywhere to jump to, really.

The bus was slowing down, though. Of course, the driver would

wonder what the heck had happened when something as heavy as a body landed on top of it. It headed towards a walkway, obviously making an emergency stop. As it went in for a landing, he used the Force to augment his leap and jumped onto the walkway, wincing when he landed on his bad leg, but he rolled into it, managed to clumsily stumble to his feet and took off down the walkway.

He hit the button for the bottom floor on a turbolift at the end and slumped against the wall as the door slid closed and it plummeted. The bounty hunters wouldn't give up that quickly, not if they were employed by Palpatine. At the moment, it would be far too easy to track him, but he could lose them on the bottom levels where there were few cameras and far too many places to hide. He knew too much about bounty hunters to even begin to contemplate the idea that they wouldn't be able to find him again if he wasn't careful.

He refused to allow himself to be distracted, but he made several mental notes as he waited for the lift to stop. How had the bounty hunter's found him in the first place? Were they tracking Dooku? Probably. Anakin doubted they'd be able to retrace his movements before the cafe as he'd been particularly careful just in case something like this happened. Still, he was far too paranoid to use the same routes again and he would have to find new ones.

As the turbolift began to slow, he threw his mind into focusing on getting away...preferably without any more confrontations. As soon as the lift stopped and the door swung open, Anakin sprinted out and into the streets, hoping that he'd been fast enough that the bounty hunters hadn't caught up with him yet.

Fortunately, even in a more industrial area such as this, little clusters of bars and brothels could be found shoved in old warehouses and basements, most of which were probably temporary and most definitely illegal.

He didn't pause as he glanced around. He needed somewhere he could take off the mechanical limbs without the possibility of any camera recording him. A stagnant cluster of beings caught his eye and he realized with a shudder that he knew of one place where such recordings would be unlikely.

Slowing to a more manageable pace, he gulped down an unfamiliar sick feeling in his stomach and approached the group of females dressed far too scantily in his opinion. Of course, that was the point, but still. He noted the different species in the group: a couple of

humans, a few twi-leks, some species he couldn't identify, a Rodian and even an insect-like verpine.

They, of course, noticed him approaching and honed in faster than a pack of gundarks on the hunt.

"What can we do for you?" one of the Twi-leks asked in a sultry tone that really only made him want to vomit. To make matters worse, her question seemed to open the flood gates and all of the others began their propositioning. Anakin backed up a step unwittingly and scanned them all again. This was a bad idea, he noted, and was about to turn and find another place on his own when noted one girl off to the side. She looked completely miserable with the exceptions of some angry glances he saw her shoot at a one or two men down the street, which was a surprise seeing as she was a Zeltron. Humanoid, with pink skin and red hair, he had known of the species, but he'd never seen one with a similar expression on their face. Zeltrons, being slightly telepathic, tended to cling to positive emotions. Actually, their entire culture revolved around shunning negative emotions. Seeing one so unhappy and with more than her fair share of bruises... It reminded him all too vividly of too many slaves he'd known.

"You," he said, pointing to her.

She looked up and saw him. For a moment an expression of disgust crossed her face, but it was gone almost as quickly as it had appeared. After a second, she sighed and nodded, moving to stand. Then she turned and walked through the doorway of the building behind her.

"You don't want her, do you?" one of the Twi-leks said in his ear. He ignored her, shook off the others' arms and followed the Zeltron into the building. It was old, dirty and smelled of rot. The remains of broken furniture and vermin nests littered what he could see of the hallways and rooms inside, a sad reminder of ages past. She lead him down a few turns and into one of the rooms. An old mattress had been shoved into one corner, the only intact piece of furniture in the room. A dim lamp hung from the ceiling, the only light source in the room. They hadn't even bothered to clean the floor, he noted with disgust. He stretched out with the Force, but couldn't find any trace of a camera...not that that was any concrete confirmation. The Force dealt mainly with the living, after all.

"The price—" she started but he cut her off.

"Are there recording devices of any means in this room?"

She blinked. "No," she finally said, sounding almost annoyed. Then she paused and regarded him. "You're...not here for me, are you. You're running from someone..."

He answered by throwing a stack of credits at her. She caught the bundle, surprised. "What's this?"

"For your time," Anakin responded. Then, before she could react, he stepped forward and put a hand on her head. "Sleep. And know that you can do better than this. If you have the ability to take back your life, do it. Stop at nothing."

He couldn't help adding that last part on and wondered when he'd become so sentimental. A Force-laced suggestion like that wasn't anything sure, but he could implant the general idea in her mind, similar to a mind trick. Usually it only helped reinforce previous thoughts and ideas that a person had already had.

The Zeltron slumped onto the mattress and Anakin immediately tore the armor and suit he was wearing off. It only took a few moments to get both the mechanical, foot-like stilts and hand extensions off. Grabbing one of the dirty blankets (ignoring the possibilities of the disgusting substances that were probably on it), he tied everything up in a little bundle, shoving the mask in at last minute. An old ventilation shaft served as an exit point. He had no doubt that his pursuers would be able to track him this far, but he wished them luck tracking him further. If they could find him after this, they deserved to catch him.

For the next hour, he crawled through the unused vents, the Force nudging him down one or another. He was surprised he never came to a point where the old, tunnel-like structures would collapse under him. Surprised, but grateful. A few times he had to use the Force to take down a grate blocking his pathway further, but for the most part, he managed to make it through to another room in the building a fair enough distance away that he felt safe (well, safer) exiting.

Slipping out into another unused room a few floors up and on the opposite end of the building from where he'd entered, he ran to a window and slipped outside, the blanket holding his disguise tied neatly around his shoulders.

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Anakin hadn't felt so grateful for a shower in months. After his escape from the temporary brothel, he'd had to meander through the bowels

of Courscant, avoiding just about everyone else (a child wondering alone through the under levels of the capitol planet at night was practically inviting trouble) and it had taken him far too long to get back to the Temple. He'd be lucky to get three or four hours of sleep now. His nightly activities had worn him out far more than he'd realized until he'd stepped into the shower, and he slumped against the refresher wall as the warm water soothed away his aching muscles. At least he'd managed to stop by the storage shed he used as a base outside of the Temple to drop off his armor and mechanical limbs.

Still, despite his aching body, he considered the night to be successful. His endeavor to reach out to Dooku was one of two positive aspects of the night that he would cling to, the other being that he'd been able to escape Sidious' pawns.

Of course that lead back to the idea that Sidious knew about him. That fact, in and of itself, made him weak in the knees and drove his body to a point far beyond sickness. It made no sense as to why the man hadn't tried to contact him here at the Temple, though. Anakin could not for the life of him figure it out. Why? If Sidious knew who he was, why hadn't he even so much as dropped a hint? It was so unlike the man...unless he still didn't know. But that made no sense at all?

No matter how much he thought about it, he could not come to a conclusion. His tired mind kept racing in circles and finally he had to just push it all away. Maybe a few hours of sleep could clear his mind enough to help him figure it out.

He wiped a towel through his hair, brushed his teeth, threw on a pair of pajama pants and finally collapsed into bed. He was out almost before his head hit the pillow.

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"Hello, Anakin," a calm, deep voice caused Anakin to jump and spin around. No one was there. Actually, nothing was there, and he felt...taller. Wait, was he in a dream again? His surroundings seemed peaceful, and he couldn't really assign any particular feature to them, be it color or shape. It certainly felt like a dream.

"Who...?" he asked, but faded off as he realized the answer to his question. He knew that presence. "Qui-gon?"

A chuckle reverberated around him and then the man appeared before him, looking him up and down thoughtfully. "So, this is the real you?"

Anakin looked down and saw an adult body, but not one familiar to him in the slightest. His hands and feet weren't mechanical and he had no problems breathing. The constant pain from his scars and the joining of metallic material to flesh was also strangely absent.

After a moment, he shook his head sadly. "No. I never had a complete body after the age of 19. As much as I would like to claim it, this isn't me."

Qui-gon shook his own head, mimicking Anakin's gesture. "Then think of it as what could be, for the body you see does indeed belong to you."

Anakin didn't say anything, not agreeing but not wanting to argue. Qui-gon seemed to sense this as he sighed.

"Anakin, you need to stop thinking you're not worthy of your own desire and dreams."

The former Sith snorted. "Yes, because that took me so far in my previous life."

Qui-gon shook his head again. "If you were truly undeserving of anything, then why did Obi-wan send you back?"

Anakin looked away. "Probably because he felt sorry for me."

"No," Qui-gon said firmly. "He did so because he loved you; because he believed in you."

"Then he is...was a fool." Besides, Anakin didn't believe that for a second. He'd lost any kinship he'd had with his Obi-wan on Mustafar.

"He did love you, you know," Qui-gon said softly. "And when you were his apprentice, he was immensely proud of you."

This time Anakin rolled his eyes. "Yes, his constant comments of disappointment were proof enough of that." And there was the strange sarcasm again.

"I know my padawan," the older man insisted. "From what I could see, he did love you, he just didn't know how to express it."

Anakin scowled. "Part of that was because he wasn't supposed to feel anything."

Suddenly the other Jedi seemed so weary. "I have never agreed with

that philosophy," he said. "And Obi-wan could never live up to it. He rarely acknowledged you because if he had done so, he would have had to acknowledge something that he had been taught was shameful. Something he'd never been able to deal with himself. He became a knight at a fairly average age for Jedi, but I fear I left him too early and violently in both timelines."

Those words caused something to click in Anakin's mind and he suddenly realized that he was talking with this universe's Qui-gon...who shouldn't know anything like that.

"Wait," he heard himself say, "you know?"

Qui-gon smiled. It was strange because Anakin felt it more than he saw it.

"I've met up with and have been speaking to the most interesting person."

"Siri!" Anakin said, a relieved smile coming to his lips. "I've been trying to get in contact with her. Something about her being here in the timeline has caused this Siri to fall into a coma, I think."

Qui-gon nodded. "Indeed. We came to the conclusion that when she came back with you, she couldn't merge with her body (whether this is because the technique that sent you back was meant for only you or because of her current condition I cannot say), and two of the same soul cannot exist in the same timeline. I fear that if she would have had a stronger presence, both the younger and older Siri would have eliminated each other."

Anakin didn't say anything. This was a bit of a surprise for his already taxed mind.

"What can we do, then?" He certainly didn't want this timeline's Siri to die so young. He still had very fond memories of the woman. "And where is she?"

Qui-gon looked grim. "She has been severely weakened, Anakin."

"Why?"

The older man hesitated before he spoke. "On Naboo, when Padme was shot, and you were having problems dealing with that, Siri put all of her strength into reaching our young Nubian Queen, knowing she was the only person who would be able to reach you. Because Padme

was not Force sensitive, Siri pushed a little too far and a little too hard. She's lucky her consciousness hasn't joined the Force. As of right now, she is recovering, but I fear she will never regain even the strength she had before."

In other words, the Siri from his own reality was fading away and that was his fault too. He closed his eyes, even though, being in a dream state, it did nothing to block the images and sensations from his brain.

Sensing his state of mind, Qui-gon continued. "But I believe there is something you can do."

Anakin's head snapped up. "Yes?"

"Once she does regain more strength, I will help her contact you, and you can merge her souls."

Anakin just sat there, staring at Qui-gon for several seconds before he spoke. "How?"

Qui-gon smiled. "I believe that simply bringing her souls together in the same body will cause them to merge. However, you will need physical contact to do so, which is why I cannot accomplish this task myself."

"I see," Anakin said, his voice level, although he knew he couldn't really hide his nervous emotions from Qui-gon. Not in this state. And just how long had it been since he had been nervous? Had he lost all the confidence and command he'd gained in his previous life when he gave up the Dark Side?

Qui-gon's next words were gentle but firm. "I know you've lost your faith in yourself, Anakin. You think you deserve every horrible thing that happened to you when you fell to the Dark Side."

Great, now he was getting counseling from ghosts too. Still, he couldn't deny the truth of Qui-gon's words.

"Tell me how I do not deserve the life of a Sith," he said, voice emotionless. "Do you know of any state of being that could be more miserable?"

"Most Sith draw strength from their misery, and as they tend to seek power and strength, they seek to keep themselves in a state of endless pain." Anakin wondered why Qui-gon was telling him something he obviously knew so well.

"I would go so far as to say they seek even greater depths of pain and misery," he commented, unable to keep the bitterness out of his tone.

Qui-gon nodded thoughtfully. "Consider that perhaps you also may have thought that putting yourself through as much pain as possible could somehow make up for your decisions and actions?"

Anakin blinked at that, his brow furrowed in a disbelieving confusion. "You suggest that I was punishing myself?" He snorted when Qui-gon didn't answer. "Perhaps, but such actions were useless endeavor. Remaining in that state of being only caused me to accumulate more debt."

"To whom were you in debt to?" Qui-gon asked.

Anakin shrugged (a gesture he had picked back up recently, it seemed as he had never done so as Vader). "Padme. My children. The Jedi I killed. The races I obliterated...everyone."

They remained quiet for what seemed like hours before the older Jedi spoke again. "Don't you think you've put yourself through enough pain?"

He didn't hesitate in his answer. "No. For what I've done, there is no redemption. No amount of pain can bring back the lives I took. My only thought is to try and prevent the pain and anguish my decisions brought to the rest of the galaxy." More silence reigned and Anakin really didn't like where this was going, so he changed the subject.

"How will you contact me when Siri Tachi is strong enough? I have been...having problems with meditation." Actually, he was rather lucky he could speak with Qui-gon now. He suspected that this meeting was possible because he really had been just that tired.

Qui-gon shook his head yet again, this time seeming exasperated. "Anakin, a trance will occur if you simply enfold yourself in the Force. That is something you can still do. Reach out and immerse your soul, and you will be able to contact me."

Hesitantly, Anakin nodded. Qui-gon noticed his reserved answer and sighed. "Anakin, have you gone so far as to lose your faith in the Force as well?"

He didn't see much of a point in lying. "I don't know," he said slowly. If it hadn't been for his connection to the Force, he may never have been freed from his slavery, but at the same time, that same

connection had led to so many awful circumstances and choices in his life. He would most certainly never trust the Dark Side again (only a fool would trust in it to begin with in his opinion), and the Dark Side was part of the Force, right? But he wanted to trust in the peace and light the Force brought to him as well. He wanted to have his old connection back, but feared that that had been lost forever.

"Even now, fear is your greatest weakness," Qui-gon pointed out, his voice kind. "It always has been and it is what bars your progress."

Anakin looked down, ashamed. "How can I trust in something that has led to so much pain?"

Qui-gon watched him for a long while before he spoke. "I cannot answer that, Anakin. It is an answer you will have to find on your own. But," he reached out and put an ethereal hand on Anakin's shoulder. He could almost imagine he really felt it there, warm and comforting. "Just as Obi-wan believed in you, so do I. You will find your answers only if you continue to search. The moment you give up is the moment you will fail."

That sounded like something Obi-wan would say.

Anakin nodded. "I do appreciate your endeavors," he whispered.

"I will always be here for you, young one," Qui-gon replied, ignoring the fact that the Anakin standing before him stood several inches taller than him and was most definitely an adult. "Now, I believe it is time for us to part, but please remember that I will never truly leave you, just as I will never truly leave Obi-wan."

Another nod and Anakin's surroundings finally faded into a restful darkness.

xXx

Anakin slumped sluggishly through the hall, not really seeing where he was going and grateful that his connection to the Force stopped him from running into anything or anyone. The stress from the previous night had really taken its toll and it had been quite a while since he'd been this exhausted. He couldn't help but feel immensely glad that he'd been able to test out of most of the Temple classes (not all of them, he couldn't draw too much attention to himself) because now he had a fair deal of free time on his hands. Oh, he was supposed to do an independent study in some of his more advanced subjects, but he could skip that for once.

It was funny, but when he'd been a padawan the first time, he could have easily talked himself out of going to class if he felt he needed (or really wanted) to. He couldn't do anything remotely irresponsible as the Emperor's second-in-command and it seemed that that habit had stuck with him. He would never follow the Council's instructions blindly, but when he received a direct order or even just a request, his first instinct (usually based on self preservation) was to follow said order.

He hated it. And it said quite a bit for the state of his mind when he didn't correct himself. After all, Jedi didn't hate. Sith did. He was trying to break away from his Sith-like tendencies, and so would usually push any feeling 'hate' into 'extreme dislike'. It had helped but right now, he just couldn't bring himself to care.

At the moment, he was heading to the library where he could find a nice corner away from Master Nu (and it said quite a bit that even now she intimidated him) and take a nap. He technically could go back to his room, but initiates' quarters were subject to random searching, and if he were caught slacking...well, it just wasn't worth the risk. He could sleep just as well in the library so why take the chance?

That was another thing that had changed. He wasn't exactly fond of unnecessary risks anymore. Not like he used to be. Mustafar had cured him of that tendency rather thoroughly.

He shook the thought from his head. He could be stranded and dying with no energy to even move a pinky and he would still find the energy to banish that thought from his head.

"Hey?" a voice broke through his thoughts, bringing him out of them. "You okay?"

Anakin blinked as he turned to look at the new voice and felt a hitch in his chest when he saw who it was. Tall and lanky with dark hair, silvery skin and flexible limbs that could twist in just about any direction (and which had been the bane of Anakin's previous spars often enough), the being that stood before him was dressed as an initiate and was watching Anakin with a tentatively concerned expression.

At first Anakin couldn't move. He hadn't thought about Tru Veld for years. He'd revisited their last actual meeting—that was more than polite acknowledgment—as a Sith often enough, had drawn on the

betrayal and pain that he'd associated with that memory. Now, without that, he found he didn't know how to react. Tru Veld had been his best friend...and then Korriban and Darra and...

He didn't want to think about it now. It brought up a mess of feelings; guilt, anger, pain... Even now he couldn't really figure out who had been to blame for Darra's death. The Dark Side had clouded so much on that mission and he'd been so susceptible. The worst thing the Jedi Council could have done at that time was exactly what they had done. How could they have sent Anakin on a mission to the Sith home world full of such recent resentment and anger? He could see now how Palpatine had worked the situation; how he'd set everything up so neatly. That had been exactly what he'd wanted, to draw an unsteady, young and powerful padawan to a planet ruled by the Dark Side and taint what little good judgment he had even more.

It had been decades since he'd felt guilt over Darra's death, but now, looking at Tru and knowing what would come—no, what *could* come. It might not happen if he managed to take out Omega early on. Hmm, he'd have to think on how to accomplish that.

And that thought was able to snap him back to reality. Tru had been growing more and more concerned as Anakin's silence drew out.

"Yes," he said formally, making sure to add in a polite nod. "I'm fine. I just had some trouble sleeping last night."

"Oh," Tru said uncertainly. "If you're sure, I guess." Anakin almost cursed himself aloud. Tru always had been good at reading other people. He'd be able to spot Anakin's half-truth a mile away.

"Thank you for your concern," Anakin said with another polite nod. "I need to get to the library now."

"Of course," the other initiate said, although again Anakin found no actual conviction in the other's voice.

He turned to leave when Tru's voice called out. "Wait."

Anakin paused. He didn't want to wait. He didn't want to be around these shadows of the past. He didn't want to get to like and know Tru again, not after things had ended. Still, not stopping would be rude, so he turned and looked at the other initiate over his shoulder.

"My name's Tru Veld, from the Squall clan," he held his hand out in greeting. Anakin looked at it for a moment, hesitating. Then he turned

and warily reached out to shake the other's hand.

"Anakin Skywalker. Thranta clan."

Tru's face lit up. Anakin wanted to groan. His former friend's sharp mind had always made him a perfect candidate for keeping up with the Temple gossip.

"You're the new initiate that just came in, right?"

"Yes," Anakin said slowly as he withdrew his hand.

"What planet did you grow up on?"

Anakin frowned but didn't see a reason to not answer. "Tatooine."

Tru frowned thoughtfully. "Never heard of it."

Anakin couldn't help but snort. "I'm not surprised. It is little more than a dust ball and has little to offer the known universe."

The thoughtful look on Tru's face deepened. "You don't sound like an initiate."

The former Sith looked away, mentally kicking himself. Hadn't he just resolved not to let his guard down around Tru? "It was a harsh planet," he said softly. "Children grow up fast."

The silver being's head bobbed in acknowledgment. "I see. Well, you're here now. Why don't we eat lunch together sometime? I know our clans will have some crossover time in the next few months." Anakin wanted to sigh and shake his fist (well, he wanted to do much more than a simple fist shake, but he wouldn't entertain such thoughts) at the universe in general.

Initiate clans usually held only two or three age groups. Once enough younglings came of age, they would be placed in one of three clans available for their age group. The older students were encouraged to befriend and help the younger students in their clan until they were either chosen as a padawan or sent to work in the Service Corps.

To help diversify and encourage social skills, the different clans were often mixed when it came to free time and even a few classes. When one age group graduated from a class, they would then be placed in another class and their free time would coincide with another clan's. There were anywhere from eleven to fourteen clans in the Jedi

Temple at any given time, depending on how many children they had in the creche, and so when an age group in a clan graduated, chances were they would be put with a clan that they hadn't coincided with in many years if ever. Of course it was just his luck that his and Tru's clans would be put together now. And if he recalled, Darra had been in Tru's group as well.

Oh, yes, this would be fun.

Funny how quickly bitterness and resentment turn into anger.

Anakin put a hand to the bridge of his nose and massaged it. He really needed that nap. Especially if he was going to go racing tonight.

"Well you don't have to if you don't want to," Tru said defensively, misreading Anakin's reaction.

"No, it isn't..." Anakin started, but then stopped. The other initiate continued to study Anakin, his silver eyes curious and not offended. Right, this was a young Tru who would happily forgive just about anything. This wasn't the older Tru who held a grudge almost better than Anakin had. This wasn't the padawan whose trust Anakin had lost.

"Look," he said finally, unable to hide the weariness decades of regret and pain and anguish tended to bring. "It isn't what you think. My friendship will only bring you pain. Pain and regret. That is all."

This time Tru looked genuinely confused. "Why do you say that?"

Anakin shook his head. "Please, just trust me on that one. Have a good day and..." he paused at the next words, realizing with surprise just how much he wanted to say them. It would be his goodbye to a friend he'd never really had any closure with, and it would be a warning to this younger version—the boy who could forgive almost anything—that Anakin was someone who didn't deserve his company, his friendship, or his trust. "And may the Force be with you, Initiate Veld," he finally finished and strode off down the hall before Tru could say anything else.

xXx

Darth Sidious did not second guess himself often. He had far too much confidence in his abilities and no small amount of well-deserved arrogance. When he did find himself doing so, however, it rattled him. Going over everything he'd learned about this Vader again and again

had given him little more insight than he'd already had.

Whoever he was (as he was most definitely male) had felt powerful, overbearing and unchallenged. He'd also commanded a control over the Force that, while nothing compared to Sidios', was commendable. He struck Sidious as someone who would prefer to work on their own. Logically, that would mean, of course, that his bounty hunters had met up with Vader after Dooku's little meeting.

That, however, made no sense at all whatsoever because that being had run. It wouldn't have been difficult for a Sith to take out the small strike force of Non-Force-Sensitive hunters, no matter how skilled they were. Not unless they had special training, which Sidious knew they didn't. And yet the being had fled.

Of course, he had also claimed to not be 'Vader', which in and of itself proved that the Sith was now showing a presence in the universe, but he doubted that Vader had taken an apprentice, and the being on the walkway hadn't shown the slightest trace of using the Dark Side (although he was undoubtedly Force Sensitive). So had Vader simply hired a rogue Jedi? Someone else who had been trained in the Force? Perhaps someone from the planet where Vader himself had come from?

It just made no sense, no matter how he looked at it and that...that frustrated him to no end. He prided himself on his ability to clearly see motives and consequences to other's actions (as well as his own), but nothing he knew fit this particular case.

Which meant he was missing something.

Oh, this would put him in a foul mood for the rest of the month, he knew. Still, being the methodical Sith he was, he went back to the beginning and went over the information again.

He would figure this out. No matter how long it took.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to my beta Batfan7! Seriously, she's amazing!

And thanks to everyone who commented! I do read all comments, even if I don't have time to answer all of them.

Thanks for reading too! :hug:

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin loved finishing a race. He especially enjoyed longer courses, but win or lose, he loved completing a circuit. Admittedly, he liked it better when he won, but just crossing a finish line gave him a unique sense of wholeness that he simply couldn't achieve any other way. That, and his problems never seemed quite so daunting when he returned to his life after forgetting everything in the adrenalin-pumping focus a race required.

In his youth, he'd always been able to lose himself in the moment. If he'd come across a situation he'd felt needed and deserved his attention (a fight, a good race, an investigation, etc.), he could 'let go', for all intents and purposes and just get away—even if only mentally—for a while. That had become much harder as he'd gotten older, and especially since he'd turned to the Dark Side. He couldn't help but be immensely grateful that the tendency had made a come back since his return to the Light. Pushing himself and his machinery to the limit, he could pretend for a moment that his confrontation with Tru Veld hadn't rattled him. He could pretend that he didn't have the fate of the entire universe riding on his shoulders far more heavily than it ever had before. He could pretend that he wasn't scared or upset or angry or in pain...everything a Jedi wasn't—everything a Sith was. He could pretend that he wasn't a horrible failure at everything and that his inner struggle between dark and light didn't exist.

It was a welcome escape.

Now, as he rounded yet another corner in the underground course, he couldn't help the exhilarated grin that spread across his face. He didn't smile often, and when he did it would usually be a slight up-turn of the corners of his mouth. It felt strange but very, *very* good to let his delight show so openly again.

He blew across the finish line amidst cheers (and boos) of the small group of onlookers and reveled in the familiar rush and sense of accomplishment. Behind him, the other racers finished the course and began to slow down as well. He gradually brought the old, worn vehicle he'd been racing to a stop, just sitting there with his eyes closed for several seconds as he treasured in the stillness that came

after a good race and committed the experience to memory.

He'd won, again. He didn't always, but he'd gained quite the reputation according to his manager. In his first life, he would have absolutely loved the attention and recognition that brought him. To some extent, he still did, in all honesty, but any sort of positive attention was something he'd had to get used to all over again.

When he'd first begun to race in this timeline, he'd been reluctant to acknowledge his wins publicly or even to the somewhat contained crowds that frequented these types of events. It was a small risk, but he didn't like taking the chance that news of his external activities might reach the Council, or worse yet, Palpatine, especially recently. The possibility that Sidious would be more observant of him had skyrocketed, even if (for some reason that Anakin *still* could not figure out) he hadn't so much as even glanced in 'Initiate Skywalker's' direction since Naboo.

The problem was, he couldn't stop, despite the fact that the earnings from his racing had really begun to build up, as had the cache of good memories he'd started to consciously store away. He wanted several that had nothing negative attached to them as he'd found it easier to chase the anger and hatred away if he had something positive to focus on. Racing definitely qualified. It had been the one thing his turn to the Dark Side had been unable to taint.

No, he couldn't stop, because it wasn't enough. He still needed more money to free the slaves he'd promised, let alone ensure that he could put his other plans into action.

"And ya come through again, kid," the harsh voice of his manager broke through his thoughts. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and stared up at the slug-like creature known only as 'Bleersh' that had become his sponsor/manager/handler. At first Anakin had been rather wary of this strange creature. Between his beady, yellow eyes and his gray skin that shone (and stank) with bodily excretions, the being didn't exactly come off as trustworthy. However, he'd been honest and hard-working whenever Anakin was involved (strange when one realized he worked in the black-market racing circuit), so the young Jedi put up with him and even found recently that he'd begun to enjoy the other's company when he wasn't in smelling distance.

"Of course," Anakin replied, popping his helmet off, but leaving the hood that obscured the bottom half of his face and his hair from any prying eyes or incriminating cameras.

"Findin' you was the best thing that ever happened to me," Bleersh continued as Anakin climbed out of the seat and dropped to the ground.

"Hm," he grunted with a nod to his manager, acknowledging the compliment.

"Quiet too," the slug-like being muttered as he handed a card to Anakin. "Usual drill. Get the money out ASAP and don't deposit the full amount anywhere."

"Hm," Anakin nodded again, taking the card happily and putting it in one of his pockets before zipping it in securely.

"Not goin' to stick around, I see," Bleersh commented, raising the skin over his eye that should have otherwise had an eyebrow.

Anakin shrugged. "I must return before my guardian notices I'm gone. All the paperwork is done, so..."

The alien nodded, but then his expression sobered somewhat. "Need an escort home?"

Shoving his hands in his jacket's pockets, the former Sith glanced up at his manager with a frown. That was strange. He'd never offered to have someone escort Anakin before. He also seemed a bit nervous. Was he expecting some trouble? Well, even if he was, Anakin doubted it was anything he couldn't handle so he finally shook his head.

Bleersh frowned and glanced around the shop that served as 'home base' for this circuit—at the other racers, their mechanics, managers and the various creatures that gravitated towards events like this. He looked for a moment as if he wanted to say something, but thought better of it at Anakin's dark expression.

"Right. Follow me." Bleersh led Anakin through the maze of discarded parts and broken-down vehicles all blanketed by layers of grease, grime and dust. They didn't have 'offices' in places like this, but each manager had laid claim to different areas in 'The Shop', which was more or less a large, abandoned warehouse of sorts with a few larger areas and storage rooms mashed unceremoniously together. Most of the managers left each other alone and while it wasn't unheard of for racers to be targeted, most of the beings that attended this particular circuit usually minded their own business as well. Still, it would be nothing short of galactically stupid to actually trust anyone down here more than was strictly necessary. As such, each area had their own set

of entrances and exits that no one else knew about (supposedly—Anakin seriously doubted 'information' hadn't leaked at some point).

Bleersh stopped in front of Anakin's usual exit—an old door hidden well behind a pile of rubble that no one had bothered to clear out—and turned, pivoting on legs that by all laws of physics the initiate knew shouldn't work at all, let alone support the being's weight.

"You be careful, you hear? Don't want you ending up face down in a low-level run-off, now do we?" In other words, he wanted his star driver to stick around and continue to make him money. It was also probably a subtle warning. Perhaps he'd heard rumors that someone wanted to take his star pupil out but hadn't substantiated it.

"I'll be fine," Anakin assured him in a monotone voice as he slipped out of the gouge in the wall and began to climb up the ladder on the other side.

"I'll hold you to that," Bleersh said after him.

He reached the platform at the top of the ladder and glanced across the gap between the building and the platform on the other edge that would allow him to continue his trek up to the Temple. It wouldn't be the first time he'd made the jump, but as missing would probably kill him (seeing as the gap went all the way down to the planet's surface), he tended to pay a little attention—that and the fact that his leg, while having scabbed over from the blaster bolt he'd received when he'd jumped off of the bridge, still tended to throb painfully if he moved it too much or in the wrong way. And he couldn't exactly get it treated by the Temple healers as they would wonder exactly how he'd gotten shot. The worst part about the whole thing had been the fact that he'd been so tired when he'd returned to his quarters that night that he'd forgotten to treat the wound then. It had become somewhat infected by the time he'd had a chance to look at it the next evening and while he was sure he was in no major danger, it was taking all that much longer to heal now.

Sighing, Anakin brought himself back to the present and readied to jump over the gap. No human, let alone a child, without the Force could have made the leap. Fortunately, for someone with his knowledge and skill, it wasn't a challenging jump. He'd actually accomplished many far more difficult tasks in his experiences. Thankfully, with age his 'act now, think later' approach had definitely mellowed. Unless he got into a sticky situation, as his encounter with Palpatine's bounty hunters had proven, he tended to be more cautious.

Calling on the Force, he ignored the pang that shot through his leg as he leapt across the gap and landed easily on the other side. Minutes later he had climbed to a walk way that would lead him to a working lift. It had only taken him a few short jumps and climbs, something he could normally do in his sleep. Still, before he could lever himself up and onto the walk, a nudge in the Force made him pause. Something was wrong.

At first he was worried that Sidious' bounty hunters had found him somehow and he had to force down a sudden surge of panic. Then he looked down and realized that the warning came from several unfamiliar beings who were trying to copy (rather clumsily) his ascent. He was being followed. Great. Still he seemed to be far enough ahead of the people (not humans, he saw, judging from the strange proportions and super-human abilities) that it shouldn't be a problem.

So why had he gotten a warning? Closing his eyes, he reached for the Force and felt around him. After a moment, he felt several more beings clustered near the elevator on the walk above him. They weren't friendly.

He frowned at the annoyance. It wasn't as if he couldn't handle them, but the fact that they knew his route home... They had to know he was a Jedi if they'd followed him before. Or at least they strongly suspected. He'd have to find a new way into and out of the Temple. That wouldn't be too much of a problem (he had many he could choose from) but it bothered him that he'd given away a potential weakness into the Jedi Temple, especially to characters like these.

Still, he doubted he'd have to worry about it too much as he tended to be extremely paranoid in making sure no one else could enter through the paths he chose, but he made a mental note to double check everything when he got back.

Also, he didn't really want to have a confrontation here, and he didn't want to confirm that he was a Jedi. It would be one of his worst-case scenarios realized and it would jeopardize his entire operation. If they knew he was a Jedi, they just had to send in evidence of his nightly escapades to force him to stop. Even if it were from a source of ill repute the Council would investigate it and Anakin did not want them to find out about his somewhat illicit funds. Plus the underground circuits might not let a proven Force User race. His guess was they were there to force him into using his abilities so they could get the evidence necessary to kick him out of the races.

He felt anger rise in his chest and quickly repressed it. They were lucky he'd denounced his Dark Side habits. Even now he could imagine several ways of showing them how 'misguided' they were to stick their noses into his business. Unfortunately, they would never know just how lucky they were.

So, what could he do now? He searched around him for an option and spotted it not four meters away and less than half a meter below him. It was a window. A large, closed window, but he could fix that. Closing his eyes again, he reached for the Force and felt for the latches on the panel. In seconds, it was open and waiting for him. He reached down to the standard grappling wire on his belt as he glanced down at the beings following him. They had maybe two more jumps before they got to his ladder, and they were either gloating or simply herding him along as they seemed to be taking their time.

All the better for him.

He managed to lodge his grappling hook around a pipe not too far away and took a deep breath. Then he jumped.

Using the Force as a guide, he managed to swing directly through the window and hit the release. He landed in the relative darkness of the room on the other side. It was a large room, probably another abandoned warehouse (those seemed to be rather plentiful in this area), but he couldn't see anything. He couldn't really feel anything either so it was undoubtedly safer than his previous options.

He'd managed to land on a stack of duroplast crates that didn't seem to be in any danger of falling. After a moment of scrutinizing his new surroundings, he reached out with the Force and closed the window again. From what he could see, the warehouse was by no means abandoned, which probably meant he'd tripped an alarm or something. It would be prudent to leave immediately, but if he was lucky, his pursuers wouldn't have any idea as to where he'd gone.

Thankful that he still had on the mask covering his nose, mouth and hair, he began to search the darkened area for an exit. Traversing the crates in the dark was no real problem (he'd been trained to fight in the dark after all) and thankfully, he ran into little else as he slipped out of the warehouse through a side entrance.

Half an hour later, he was sneaking back into the Temple. After double checking that everything was in place and just as strong as ever, he went back up to his room, wondering how his apparent new

notoriety in the underground racing world would affect his plans.

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Anakin sat awkwardly in the simple, padded chair across from Master Xio. He'd been shown in not minutes before and had since been sitting silently, waiting for the Master to stop studying him and say something. His uneasiness wasn't helping his already strained patience either and he'd started to sort through his recent racing memories to keep himself calm.

Finally she smiled at him. "Well, Anakin, why don't we start with the classes you're taking here at the Temple. Tell me about them."

It was a safe conversation and they both knew it. He knew the theory behind the words too. It was a common tactic for interrogation, actually; get the subject talking about something mundane and it would be easier to let something of importance slip. Make them comfortable; throw them off their guard. Apparently the tactic was useful in counseling as well.

Anakin had come into this knowing he'd have to be careful. He was walking a fine line and could easily slip if he didn't weigh his words carefully. And he did *not* want to slip. The idea of explaining everything—to anyone—seemed...well, 'overwhelming' didn't really encompass the magnitude of what he would have to admit to. In such an event, how could he start? Where would he start? The beginning? Oh, he could easily see how that would work out—trying to describe exactly how a life the Jedi would never understand eventually led him to fall the Dark Side.

Yet again, it struck him as to just how useless this entire farce was. Still, he would make the best of the circumstances. If Palpatine had taught him anything useful, it would have to be that he needed to face situations head on and not sulk or stew on it as he would have done in his original youth. Yes escaping the world every now and then could be useful, but one should avoid making a habit of it. Running and hiding from problems only made them worse in the long run.

"Of course, Master," he said with a stiff nod. He may not be comfortable, but this was something he could talk about. "My first class of the week is the advanced mathmatics class I was placed in..."* He continued in that vein for several minutes, explaining most of his classes in detail until he reached those he'd 'graduated' from.

"I've tested out of all the history courses and many of the more

politically based classes. I'm not sure why they didn't let me before." He paused, allowing a slight frown onto his face as his comment caught up with him and mentally kicked himself for letting his guard down. He knew better than that! Then he glanced warily at his counselor, wondering exactly what Master Xio would make of that comment.

"People, even Jedi, rarely think to do anything dealing with circumstances they don't expect," the older Jedi responded, not unkindly. At least she was treating him like an adult. "It is a fallacy that I believe only experience can cure. As I doubt we will have a case similar to yours any time soon, and we haven't dealt with anything even remotely similar to it in decades if not centuries, I would ask that you forgive us for that oversight." She said it with such a soft, earnest smile that Anakin couldn't help but see it from her point of view. Eventually he nodded, surprised to find that he really could let that one, small detail go. It was strange as he'd never really had an easy time forgiving anyone for even the smallest slights in his previous life.

"Now why don't we talk about the classes you're having a harder time with." Anakin couldn't help but shrink back just slightly at that. He didn't want to talk about his Force Techniques class. At all. Ever.

"I'd rather talk about my other classes," he'd said as firmly as he could manage.

Master Xio simply looked at him and raised a skeptical eyebrow, although she never lost her smile. He couldn't help but think that she was just calling him on his rather poor evasion although it held no malice at all whatsoever. He wanted her expression to be sardonic, like Obi-wan's had been. Then he'd feel justified in being resentful of it.

"I know," she said after a few moments. "And I won't force the subject, but can I make my own guesses? You don't have to confirm or deny them if you don't wish to."

No, he didn't want her to guess. She'd undoubtedly be wrong and have a completely incorrect idea about him. Then he remembered that he didn't particularly care and forced himself to shrug nonchalantly.

If Master Xio noticed his stiffness, she didn't comment on it. "I think you're having a problem because of your previous training. Probably the darker training," she said, her voice calm and soft.

Anakin still stiffened and felt his jaw clench. "They told you?" he

asked, his voice low but dangerous. He'd figured that his secret wouldn't last long with the stupid Council keeping it, but he still couldn't help the stab of betrayal and anger he felt. Every now and then he hated being right.

Master Xio blinked at him for a moment before shaking her head slowly. "No one told me anything, Anakin," she said. "It's obvious that you had previous training to be this far ahead in your classes, especially considering your background." Anakin couldn't help a slight wince. Was it really that obvious? But he couldn't start holding back even more now as it would raise more questions than before. He couldn't really *afford* to hold back anymore either, especially in his saber classes. He needed to get stronger in them. Still...

"Then how did you know about the Dark Side training?" he asked defiantly.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I didn't. As I told you, it was a guess. Your general attitude towards Jedi is one of trepidation and wariness. If you've had training before you came to the Temple, it couldn't have been from a Jedi or it would stand to reason that you would trust us more initially. So I guessed that your teacher must have not cared for the Jedi, and if that is the case they could have easily been a Dark Side user. I came to a simple, logical conclusion."

Anakin was torn between attempting to throw her off and trying to hide how much her rather accurate guesses had thrown him off. It reminded him a little too much of Sidious. He didn't know what to say or how to act, so he just sat there in a sort of frozen, horrified stiffness that he couldn't seem to break free from.

He was contemplating just getting up and leaving when the old woman sighed. "I hadn't expected it to be completely true, or at least I hadn't expected you to know your training had been dark."

It took more effort than he wanted to admit to open his mouth, but he wanted her to know that he wasn't just a Sith spy (because that would go over so well with the Council). "I...had two...Masters who trained me. One of them was a Jedi. The other...wasn't."

Master Xio watched him with a blank face for several seconds before shaking her head, seeming overwhelmed. "Your strength, Anakin, is astounding."

That finally jolted Anakin from his trance. Why did everyone keep saying that?! This timeline's Obi-wan had said it, This timeline's Yoda

had said it, and now this woman who barely knew him... He wasn't about to correct her though. Instead he said nothing.

"You don't believe me, do you." She hadn't asked a question so Anakin didn't respond. He just sat there, staring at her hands resting peacefully on the arm rests of the comfortable chairs she'd had in her 'office' or whatever this space was. He was sure it wasn't her quarters.

Another sigh from her direction. "That's something we'll work on. For now I want you to know that I won't judge you for your past actions. I can't if I'm to help you, and I want to help you."

Of course she wanted to help him. It was her mission from the Council.

"In other words, I will not condemn you for your past. I don't care what you've done, that I can promise," she went on, her voice firm but warm. He had to admit, she was good. "Or more accurately, I care, but only so far as to how those actions are still affecting you. Whether you believe me on that account or not, it's true. You could have the worst possible past and I don't care because you're here now and you're trying to fix it. I'd like to help if you'll let me."

Yeah right. Like he was going to trust her. He hardly knew her. Besides, she was a Jedi. She belonged to and believed in this corrupt order...no. No, he couldn't bring himself to trust her, or anyone else. So he sat there, staring at nothing and refusing to meet her eyes or even acknowledge her.

"How about we stop for today? Unless you wish to stay..."

He most certainly did not. Standing up, he bowed respectfully to her and retreated as quickly as he dared.

"Anakin," her voice sounded reprimanding. He froze. "You still need to talk to the droid"

He felt his lips thin but he still didn't say anything. "I'll have D-40 come in and you can use the new memory chip on the table."

He didn't want to. He *really* didn't want to. But then again, it would give him a chance to take a look at the droid unsupervised... Maybe it wouldn't be so bad?

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It wasn't difficult to shut the droid off. A Force nudge in the right area and voila. It surprised him how far some advancements had come in the equivalent of the next 30 years while other things almost seemed to digress. He knew several designs off the top of his head for a more efficient motivator and power source , but the actual wiring for the robotic interface was genius. It would be a *crime* to not explore this, and so he went to work.

Anakin couldn't decide which he found more amusing: the fact that they'd asked him not to play with or take apart the droid that would be used in his 'therapy' sessions, or the fact that they realized he had every intention of doing so. He'd never answered when they asked for his word. The sessions wouldn't be recorded by anything but the droid and, as promised, Anakin would take the 'memory chips' (not computer 'memory', but the actual recordings—the chips were basically miniature hard drives) with him when he left the session. Anything he felt he couldn't tell the mind-healers or the other Jedi he would supposedly tell the droid because apparently just 'getting it out' was a form of therapy, according to Girth.

Of course, mechanics and robotics were a bit of a relaxing hobby for him that tended to calm him down. Best of all, he figured they would eventually guess that he was indeed 'messing' with the droid, but was confident they wouldn't call him on it. Not for a while at least. It would be their attempt at garnering trust; an 'if I trust him, perhaps he'll trust me' sort of venture that would ultimately fail, but he could use it until they figured out that he was on to their methods.

Besides, he had decades of future technology almost rote embedded inside his brain. Even with some of the less effective designs that had become the norm in the future he was confident that he could wire the droid far more effectively and efficiently. He would take it as a personal challenge to find more ways to do so.

As he'd thought, when he left after his two time-block session, he was positive Master Xio did not miss the grease on his hands or the burn marks on his sleeves, but she didn't comment.

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"How was that?" Hik'te asked through his heavy breathing. He'd just completed a kata he'd learned and Anakin had encouraged him to finish. He'd even helped the blue-skinned boy and given him hints and pointers. But Anakin of all people knew that that type of help could only go so far.

"Better," Anakin said with a nod. "Although your stance on the last one is throwing off your balance. You need to move your heel towards you more but your leg needs to come out further." It felt incredibly strange to have the children he counted as allies look up to him so. He'd taught 'apprentices' as a Jedi and as a Sith. Ashoka hadn't really worked out, and none of the Sith apprentices he'd taken had lasted long (with maybe the exception of Starkiller, but he couldn't really count that as a success either).

When the other children had started to ask him questions about why he was advancing so quickly in his saber arts when they weren't, he'd almost panicked. Why would they ask *him* questions?! Anyone he'd ever tried to teach...well, it just hadn't gone well. It had taken him a moment to calm down. Then he'd calmly and truthfully answered their questions and gone back to his practicing.

After a while, he'd gotten comfortable enough with their inquiries to point out the small mistakes he could see. He didn't go out of his way, but he knew that if he wanted to keep their allegiance, he would have to interact with them. So he did. He also wanted them to survive the upcoming years, so he pushed them when he was around to do so. He encouraged their practicing, drawing from the little experience he could remember from his mother.

It had been a strange thought that had come to him one day in meditation. Why had he been so obedient with her and not with Obi-wan? Surely it couldn't be all Sidious. Then he'd remembered how Obi-wan had treated him, not without understanding, no, his guidance had been gentle and firm, but it had also had little encouragement or congratulations. His mother, on the other hand, would often celebrate what he did when she knew he'd done the best he could. She would guide him and push him when she felt he could do better.

Hik'te could definitely do better, but he had indeed improved. Anakin was not the boy's teacher, but he could give an honest opinion and he could help them along the way.

He'd never realized cultivating allies could be so difficult. Obi-wan had always made it look so easy...

Hik'te groaned. "I'm never going to get it right," he muttered.

"Especially if you give up," Anakin found himself saying.

"What?" Hik'te asked, shooting a confused look at the other boy.

Anakin mentally kicked himself. He hadn't wanted to butt in and give advice like this. That was a 'master's' job, not a contemporary's. But, he'd opened his mouth, he would have to follow through.

"Life is a series of failures," he said simply, shutting his own lightsaber off as he watched Hik'te. "It always has been and always will be. People who succeed are people who keep trying and failing until they find a way to succeed."

Alright, life wasn't as simple as that, but that had been one thing he'd learned from Obi-wan that had stuck with him, even through his time as a Sith. He'd just gotten to a point where he had been too impatient to wait for success, whether it was himself or his subordinates. What Anakin had also noticed, although he didn't add the thought onto the end for Hik'te, was that the people who seemed to have the most success were the people who could either learn quickly from their mistakes or the people who could learn from others' mistakes. Still, there was something to be said about persistence.

Hik'te cocked his head and studied Anakin silently.

Finally he seemed to gather his wits and asked a question.

"How old are you, really?"

Anakin's brow furrowed, half in consternation, half in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You don't act like a kid. None of us think so."

The rest of their little group had opted to go down to the room of a thousand fountains about a half hour before, but Anakin and Hik'te had remained behind to finish working on their respective katas.

Anakin added a frown to his expression. "You discuss me when I am not there?" Alright, it wasn't the best thing he could say to reassert his cover as a child, but it was a valid question.

Hik'te seemed to blush at that, his blue cheeks darkening slightly. "Well, only because no one has the guts to ask you to your face."

"Except you."

"Well someone had to," Hik'te said a little sheepishly. Anakin almost had to hide a smile. Almost. Hik'te reminded Anakin a lot of himself. He was young, brash, head-strong and while he was a lot happier and

calmer than Anakin had ever been, he also tended to act without really thinking through the consequences. He had a sad, sneaking suspicion that Hik'te hadn't been taken as a padawan because no one wanted to deal with trying to tame that if they didn't have to.

Finally Anakin shook his head. "Even if I were older than I look, age does not always bring wisdom."

Hik'te shrugged. "Maybe not, but I don't know anyone who's as wise as you are."

At that, Anakin rolled his eyes. "Have you met Master Yoda? Old, green, about this tall," he held his hand out around his mid-section...which, at his current height, would make his imaginary Yoda about half a meter tall, if that.

The blue-skinned padawan snickered and covered his mouth when he recognized Anakin's exaggeration. "He doesn't count," he finally managed to say.

"Master Windu?"

Hik'te frowned good-naturedly. "Him neither."

"Master Yaddle?"

"Stop naming Council Members! That isn't fair!"

Anakin shook his head again, this time allowing a small smile. "I'm just pointing out that there are many people wiser than I am here at the Temple. I'd say most people are, really."

Hik'te suddenly seemed to sober at Anakin's words. "You shouldn't say things about yourself like that."

"I shouldn't speak the truth?" Anakin asked sardonically.

Hik'te shook his head. "It's not the truth. It's because you talk like that that Hale thinks you need a master."

Anakin blinked. That made no sense at all whatsoever. "What?"

"You know," Hik'te shrugged, "someone to watch out for you and tell you how awesome you are. Someone to protect you."

At that, the former Sith found himself frowning in disapproval. "I can protect myself."

Hik'te shrugged again. "Maybe, with the way you move with a lightsaber in your hand. But...I don't know," he seemed to be struggling to put his thoughts into words. "No one else is as mean to you as you are."

Anakin had to blink at that. Was insight catching among young souls or something?

"Are you implying that the person I need protection from the most is myself?" he asked slowly, and more than a little uneasily.

Hik'te frowned and looked up at the ceiling, thinking hard. Finally he seemed to come to a conclusion and nodded. "Yeah. That's what I mean."

"You may be more right than you realize," Anakin muttered.

"What?" Hik'te asked.

"I said you need to do it again," Anakin said, then turned back to his kata. He felt the other initiate's eyes on his back for a moment before a second snap-hiss sounded as the training blade sprang to life and Hik'te went back to his own kata.

Twenty minutes later they were kicked out so another class could be held, and they made their way down to meet their fellow initiates in silence. Anakin wasn't sure whether it was tense or companionable.

Perhaps he had been a little too perceptive when choosing his allies this time around.

Chapter End Notes

*Author's note: The classes that Anakin has tested out of are basically classes he feels someone of 'genius' caliber with spotty, if specialized training (which is his cover story) could test out of—IE: General Galactic History, Basic Political Science, Basic Sociology, Mechanics, Geography, Piloting, etc.

The classes he still has to take as an initiate are some Mathematics courses (he has tested out of a few of these, but for purposes of this story, the Temple requires a certain amount of years in Mathematics anyway, no matter what level he'd reached), Basic Core-World Cultures (which he is mostly familiar

with, but as he knows more of how they worked under a different rule, he needs a bit of a brush-up), Business (he knows how to run an Empire, not a business in a democracy, and due to missions and what not, he would need to know business basics and laws), Lightsaber Training (self explanatory), Force Theory (which he could probably teach better than the teacher, but they refused to allow him to test out of it, although they did allow him to 'catch up' to his age group—note: he hasn't yet because, again, he's trying to keep a low profile), Combat Training, Tactics (he needs the first for muscle memory but could—again—probably teach the second), Chemistry, Physics, Astronomy, Beginner's Healing, 'Basic' (as in the language) Writing, Grammar and Writing Composition, Psychology (of one's own race) and (of course) Force Techniques.

Yes, I know that's a lot for a young child, but realize that most initiates will easily fulfill the requirements by the time they reach the age of 12, and can then focus on finding a master. Anakin is taking on a bit more than a normal initiate as he can A. handle it intellectually, and B. he needs to 'catch up' in many of those classes, at least in the eyes of the Temple. With how the Jedi have to live, I can see that initiates would be expected to be well into the equivalent of an Earth-based college education by their 13th birthday.

Also, the Jedi don't strike me as an order that would encourage anyone to have a great deal of extra time on their hands. In my story, they study 3-5 subjects a day (switching every other day—an A/B schedule, if you're familiar with that—with one day off per week) on a regular basis and still have to fit in meditation and homework. There's a reason Anakin is thankful for a few extra free periods.

Additionally, for the purposes of this fic, initiates would be required to study independently for advanced classes in some areas. For instance, they would be required to choose a different culture or society and only to study and then report on the psychology, religions and biology of their chosen culture. They would have 3 months to work on their report and that would carry into their Padawan years as well.

Actually, let me list the classes that would continue into their Padawan years (note: most of these will have different levels available to different age groups/skill sets): Mathmatics, Lightsaber Training, Force Theory, Combat Training (brush ups

and side classes with tactics would go in this as they got older as it would be a matter of putting tactics into practice), the Psychology of common races and Force Techniques. Also, if a padawan chose, they could continue (and it is highly encouraged that they do) in a more focused skill set, such as piloting, politics, history, healing or even music and art, if they can convince the Council and their Master that they are dedicated enough and have a good reason that will benefit the Jedi Order or a Mission.

Thanks to Batfan7!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been four days since Qui-gon had contacted him and he hadn't so much as glimpsed the man in the Force. He'd tried to contact the spirit for an update, but to no avail. He would say he found himself frustrated, but he had far too many other things to worry about and focus on. Like his upcoming first session with Girth, or the fact that he still had to find a new way to his racing circuit (he'd have to work on that tonight as there would be a race), or the fact that Dooku hadn't contacted him, or the fact that Darth Sidious still knew that 'Vader' was out there and Anakin had no doubt he was searching hard for the supposed Sith. Knowing Sidious, it was only a matter of time before he came up with a conclusion that would be too close to the truth for comfort. Still, time travel? Anakin was sure he had some time before his former master connected the dots, but he still had to calm his urge to rush to complete the plans he'd made.

Also, something of a bother was the fact that the children in his 'group' had taken to practically stalking him. At first he'd found it annoying when they would pop up at the strangest times (and he even had a rather strong suspicion that they were taking turns skipping class). Now he just found it tiring. Their rudimentary attempts at trying to socialize with him and keep his spirits up were amusing, almost endearing, if he were someone inclined to feel such emotions. Children, especially human children, grew the most socially around the age of eleven to thirteen, from what he could remember (not that he was an expert on child psychology). The fact that his much younger 'friends' were worried about him at all was in and of itself a testament to their maturity and determination. He wondered what would happen if he gave them pointers on their 'spying' technique.

It wasn't usually too difficult to give them the slip, and so when he needed a moment, he would just get away. They apparently hadn't figured out that he was sneaking out at night either (thank goodness because he wasn't sure he could explain that).

Still, he mostly put up with them and found, to his surprise, that it wasn't that difficult.

"Anakin, hurry up or we'll be late!" Maelee said from a few feet ahead.

She was the stickler of the group, always having to be on time, always putting rules ahead of everything else (she hadn't once shown up during a class period, unlike the others, although she seemed happy to take her fair share of 'Anakin watch' during the rest of the day). Hik'te and Coira trailed behind her like puppies following their mother, probably because they just didn't want to set her off. The girl could lecture almost as well as Obi-wan.

The four of them were supposed to meet up with Hale and Thoran before class for a few minutes. Anakin didn't see much of a point to meeting the other boys for nothing more than an awkward exchange of 'hellos' that could just as easily be saved for after class, so he didn't see much of a reason to hurry.

"Go on ahead," he responded. "I'll be there."

The three children exchanged glances and didn't hurry ahead. Anakin let out a mildly exasperated sigh, but he also felt a tug at his lips. It was strange to think that these children cared so much for him when they hardly knew him.

A twinge in the Force sang through him and he paused. Obi-wan was near. Ahead of them, if Anakin wasn't mistaken. Sure enough, the ginger-haired knight strode around the corner not ten seconds later, avoiding Maelee and her group with a smile. Then his eyes fell on Anakin and he paused.

"Anakin," he greeted.

"Knight Kenobi," Anakin returned with a shallow bow.

"How are you?"

"I am well," Anakin said, then his eyes dropped to Obi-wan's arm. "How is your injury?"

"Actually, I was just cleared for duty," Obi-wan said, moving his arm to prove his point. "I will be leaving the Temple for a mission tomorrow if I'm lucky."

Something in Obi-wan's tone rubbed Anakin the wrong way. "If you're lucky?"

The knight shifted ever so slightly. "I haven't particularly enjoyed my...vacation."

"Oh?" Anakin asked nonchalantly. "Why not?"

"I don't like just sitting around when I could be doing something," Obi-wan explained. "I hate having nothing to do."

Anakin frowned. That wasn't like the Obi-wan he remembered.

"You're lying," he said.

A pang of defensiveness hit Anakin across their bond and Obi-wan frowned. For a moment, he was a padawan again, waiting to be chastised by his master. Then he realized where he was and what he'd said and that no initiate would ever say that to a knight. Fortunately, he could take a page out of his fellow Padawans' books and hide it behind childish honesty, then pass it off as him not fully comprehending the social structure of the Temple yet. Yes, that sounded plausible.

"Why do you say that?" Obi-wan asked calmly.

Anakin decided to backtrack a bit. "No, not lying...but you're not telling the truth either."

The expression that crossed Obi-wan's face seemed to be a mixture of that same defensiveness, curiosity and...was that fear?

"What truth would that be?"

Anakin cocked his head. "You miss him, and you don't want to think about it. You don't want *time* to think about it."

And there he felt a stab of pain released to the Force. Right on the credits, although it seemed that Obi-wan had yet to admit the truth even to himself. Well, that wasn't good. He knew his former master well enough to know that when Obi-wan was hurting, he threw himself into work. Anakin could think of several instances off the top of his head when he'd done exactly that and Anakin had had to bail him out. Except now he wouldn't be there to lend a hand and he was surprised to find that that scared him—not out of some twisted loyalty to his Obi-wan (although that was there too), but because he genuinely didn't want this younger, more vulnerable Obi-wan to die like that.

Funny, now that he thought about it. Obi-wan probably needed Anakin's 'mind healing' sessions far more than Anakin did. Well, Obi-wan might be able to actually get something out of them in any case.

Something he'd always appreciated about his former Master was the way he would consider what people said to him if he found such words unexpected. After a few, pained moments, he seemed to come to a conclusion.

"Perhaps you are right, young one," he said softly and slowly, as if it hurt to say the words. "I feel the hole he left in my life in everything I do here."

And that was different too, wasn't it? He certainly remembered a pained, grieving Obi-wan from his first few years, but it hadn't been like this. Why not? He'd gone away on solo missions until Anakin had been allowed to find his first saber crystal on Ilum (and thus been allowed on missions), but he'd always been certain Obi-wan would come back. For some reason, he wasn't now. Something inside Obi-wan felt...desperate, almost reckless. Was that usual for a newly-minted knight? It certainly didn't fit the Jedi Master or even the Jedi Knight Anakin had come to know.

He didn't know how to help, and that hurt. And what was worse, even if he did figure it out, it wasn't his place to do anything. Obi-wan wasn't his master anymore...and there was still too much relief tied to that fact for him to try and change it. But at the same time, he knew the man—knew that Obi-wan lived for other people and would gladly trade his life for theirs. He'd never lived for himself. Not once.

Anakin had hated his first year at the Temple in the original timeline. He'd never felt so alone and unwanted. But unwanted or not, it suddenly struck him as to how much Obi-wan had clung to him. Anakin had depended on Obi-wan for everything from a home to a future. Without him, he would have been sent into the Jedi Service Corps as a best-case scenario. Knowing that someone's very life was tied so desperately to his own had grounded him in a way nothing else could. Obi-wan hadn't wanted Anakin, but he had *lived* for Anakin because that's how Obi-wan was—everyone else came first.

And this Obi-wan didn't have that.

Anakin knew that life wasn't fair (oh how he knew), but he seemed to realize rather abruptly how much his and Obi-wan's entire situation had been set-up to fail, not necessarily by the Council or even Palpatine, but by life in general. Obi-wan hadn't been ready to take on Anakin, but he'd needed to take on Anakin to survive. It had poisoned their relationship, but had strengthened it at the same time. And...even knowing how it had all turned out, he missed it. He missed

Obi-wan's constant presence. He still hadn't found it in his heart to forgive the man, but they had been close and part of him wanted that back. Anakin would be lying to himself if he said otherwise. He didn't think that was healthy and it almost physically hurt to think about, even now.

No wonder his feelings towards Obi-wan were nothing but one massive, convoluted mess. That didn't mean he wanted the man to die.

That was a strange revelation that he almost balked at. He truly and honestly did not want Obi-wan to die anymore. Was he, perhaps, coming to accept (not forgive) what had happened between them somehow?

Obi-wan hadn't said anything while Anakin had been lost in thought, probably wandering through is own personal revelations.

Finally, and with no small amount of will, Anakin decided that, this once, he would have to push his pride aside, no matter how much it grated at him.

"There are...many people here who would find your death as difficult as you are finding your Master's."

Obi-wan just stared at him, blinking in a sort of numb shock. After a few minutes, Anakin figured he'd said what he needed to and nodded to the knight before moving on towards his allies, who had stopped to watch the interaction from several meters away.

Thankfully they were intuitive enough to not say anything as they fell into step beside him and made their way to class.

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Throughout the rest of the day, Anakin couldn't seem to shake the unsettling feeling his confrontation with Obi-wan had given him. This Obi-wan seemed so different from his Obi-wan, and he'd only been in the past a little over half of a galactic standard year. It wasn't huge or glaringly obvious, but it was there and that both gave Anakin hope and made him more wary at once. What else had his actions actually changed that he had no actual knowledge of? And would it be like the changes he'd seen in Obi-wan? Not necessarily for the good, but not necessarily for the bad either—he liked how this universe's Obi-wan seemed less up-tight and more accepting, but he didn't like the recklessness he sensed either. And how could he deal with all of the changes?

It didn't take him long to come to the conclusion that he'd just have to take them one at a time and deal as best he could. It took him just a little longer to realize that that was exactly what he'd been doing all along. It didn't exactly reinforce any hope he had for the future.

Eventually he just pushed the thought from his mind. There wasn't anything he could really do about Obi-wan...and he found it disconcerting that he actually wanted to do something to begin with, no matter how much he told himself that it wasn't his place and he shouldn't feel obligated.

Still in the same contemplative mood, he made his way to his last class of the day...the one that would precede his upcoming session with Girth. That knowledge wasn't doing his nerves any favors. Fortunately the class was one he had no chance of failing; Force Theory. Especially at his current initiate level, the class couldn't even remotely be considered to be a challenge for him. In later years, it would go into how societies could affect the timbre of the Force in the area—taint it dark or keep it pure, how one could go about beginning to purify a dark Force area, how to construct simple inanimate objects that maintained a Force signature, etc. All of those subjects were fascinating no matter how many times Anakin had studied them, but the current class level mainly dealt with describing techniques that one could use to access the Force under duress (that they would later practice in their Force Techniques class), how one's physical condition can affect one's ability to access the Force, and other similarly mind-numbing basics.

Because the class dealt with theory Anakin had long-since memorized, he was easily at the head of the class. The best the class could do for him at the moment was give him a guideline as to what level of Force Awareness should be appropriate for a child his age.

Today the Teacher, one Master Kleon, would return an essay where Anakin had proven he could write in his sleep as he had practically done so. It had been due the day after his confrontation with the Bounty Hunters, and right after his run-in with Tru Veld. He still had little to no doubt he'd get full marks. Actually, what worry he had stemmed from the knowledge that he may have been too tired to dumb it down as much as he usually did.

Gah! Forget Sidious, it would be the combination of innumerable little things like this building on each other that would tear his life down!

"Hey, you okay?" a voice broke through his thoughts and he glanced

up to see Coira, Hik'te, Thoran and Hale all looking at him warily. Maelee had gone into their actual classroom, but Anakin could see her staring worriedly towards their little group at the door.

"Yes," Anakin replied, reprimanding himself for getting too lost in his thoughts. "I am just a little tired today."

Coira bit her lip and looked at the boys nervously. "Maelee said you've been acting strange all day..." she faded off and Anakin could hear the 'again' that everyone knew should be tagged onto the end of that sentence.

"Yeah, ever since you talked to that knight earlier," Hik'te said in his usual, exuberant voice that belied his troubled expression.

"Wait, he spoke to a knight?" Thoran asked, his large, brown eyes wide with surprise.

"Yeah," Hik'te said, the excitement in his voice suddenly seeming far more genuine. He'd be a good under-cover agent if someone would take him on and help him learn to control his seemingly endless energy. Anakin hadn't realized he'd been forcing the tone until he'd heard genuine excitement. "And I think it was Knight Kenobi!"

"The Sith Killer?!" Thoran asked in surprised, his large nostrils flaring as he blinked down at Anakin.

Anakin inwardly winced at the title. It had been a while since he'd heard Obi-wan called that.

"What if he's thinking about taking you on as an apprentice?" Coira asked, catching onto Hik'te's excitement. Then she seemed to calm down. "But then why aren't you happy?"

Anakin frowned. "He's not going to take me on as an apprentice," he said, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice. He may be on better terms with this Obi-wan, but that didn't mean that he didn't still have problems with the man. "He was one of the Jedi who brought me back to the Temple," he clarified.

"Oh," Coira deflated with a sigh. "Sorry."

The former Sith shrugged it off but didn't say anything.

"So what's wrong?" Hik'te asked more insistently.

Anakin didn't really know how to answer that. He doubted they'd take a 'nothing' or another excuse about him not sleeping well again, but he wasn't about to even hint at all of his problems. That wouldn't be fair to them and it was monumentally stupid to trust in immature, sheltered initiates anyway, even if he had begun to grow rather fond of them (and that had started to worry him too).

"Leave him alone," Hale said suddenly, his voice quiet but firm. "He'll tell us when he's ready."

"But—" Coira started, but Hale cut her off with a shake of his head before he turned and made his way into the classroom and sat down next to Maelee. She whispered something to him, but he simply shook his head again and took out his data pads.

Relief and amused interest had begun to push aside Anakin's previous preoccupation. Hale was easily the most mellow ten-year-old Anakin had ever met, and right now he felt a touch of gratefulness towards the boy's perception.

Hik'te let out a sigh and turned to the classroom again. "C'mon, guys," he muttered, shooting one last wary look at Anakin. Quietly (and with a touch of frustration obvious in most of their actions) the group of Padawans filed into the room.

Just a few minutes later, Master Kleon started the class. As a gran, he tended to be a bit intimidating to the initiates, not as much as say a Wookie might be, but anything that had three eye-stalks that could move in opposing directions (and could hone in on as many focal points at any given moment) didn't miss much. He was a strict teacher that knew his subject well. He also taught their Force Techniques class, and while Anakin felt the Knight knew theory better than practice, he taught that subject almost as well. Which was probably why he tended to focus on Anakin—an initiate who knew the theory like the back of his hand but couldn't seem to put anything into practice for the life of him.

He began the time-block by informing them to check their data pads for their essays. Anakin immediately opened the file and checked it over. As expected, he'd received full marks, but the note at the end asking him to please see Master Kleon after class gave him a rather uneasy feeling on top of the wariness that had come from his run-in with Obi-wan.

The class passed by in agonizingly slow minutes that seemed to tick

away at a slower pace just to bother Anakin. He berated himself for allowing his impatience to exert itself, but he couldn't seem to do much about it. He even tuned out the teacher and began to release his anxiety to the Force.

Finally Master Kleon dismissed the class and Anakin informed his little group of initiates that he would meet them later as he had been asked to discuss his assignment (at least that was what he assumed this little meeting would be about).

"I will wait, then," Thoran said with a smile (and those always seemed more intimidating on a bothan, although it didn't startle Anakin in the slightest). "I too have the next time-block free."

Anakin wanted to roll his eyes, but instead he nodded and made his way to the front of the class.

"Ah, Initiate Skywalker," Master Kleon said with a reassuring smile that in all actuality did nothing to reassure Anakin at all.

"Master Kleon," he said, bowing respectfully before straightening. "You wished to see me?"

"Indeed I did," Master Kleon nodded and pulled out a data pad. "I was curious as to something you said in your assignment and was wondering if you could clarify for me."

Anakin frowned. If he'd wanted clarification, why hadn't he said so in his notes? And why had Anakin gotten such a good score if he'd been too vague or outright wrong in the Knight's eyes?

"Of course, Master," he said with a perfectly straight face.

The Jedi scanned through the document on the screen before stopping, two of his eyes fixed on the data pad while the other one seemed to scrutinize Anakin. It was...disconcerting. Then again, Anakin had always found gran to be slightly unsettling.

"Ah, here it is," he said and set the data pad in front of Anakin for him to read through. Anakin did so and then tried not to blanch as Master Kleon continued to explain. "Your description of the Dark Side and how it feels...well, it just goes over and above what the text said and I would like to know where you got your information."

The assignment had been on how to recognize the Dark Side's influence and Anakin knew what the textbook said. Most Jedi

described the Dark Side vaguely; 'cold', 'wrong', or 'tainted', maybe 'dark' if they were being particularly inarticulate. The text didn't go into much more detail, using words like 'turbulent' and 'deceptive' at its most accurate. Anakin had skimmed over the reading assignment in class when the project had been assigned and he hadn't been impressed but he also hadn't been surprised. How would anyone who hadn't touched the Dark Side before know how it feels?

Anakin reread what he'd written with a growing sense of dread. It had been right after he'd described how normal societies tended to act around and/or avoid areas tainted with the Dark Side. Then he'd gone on to describe it (in far too adult terms, as he'd feared) and its lure.

Because of it's nature, the Dark Side of the Force can be surprisingly difficult to detect when a user wishes to conceal their use of it. When a user is not trying to suppress their connection, one can detect its usage from the sensation of a burning but cold, twisted taint on the light. Despite the usual initial reaction of shying away from something so unnatural, it can still be considered attractive to anyone seeking power and tends to easily seduce those susceptible to its call. Such people tend to be power-hungry, bloodthirsty, desperate, conceited, angry, bitter, easily annoyed, and usually convinced of their own superiority no matter the truth of their circumstances. The more advanced users can often hide these emotions from people they interact with daily and draw even more power from the frustration such a deception brings.

He was never writing anything about the Dark Side while tired again. It hadn't even occurred to him that something like this might draw attention.

"Did you somehow get ahold of a holocron?" Master Kleon asked when he didn't answer. "Before you came to the Temple perhaps?"

He didn't see much of a way out of this. Just because of the tone of the paragraph he knew that the Jedi Master wouldn't need the Force to see Anakin would be lying if he said he'd simply read the information somewhere. He was right, it was just too personal. But if he said something about a holocron, the Jedi would want to know where to find the supposed artifact.

"No," he said finally, his voice quiet. "Before I came to the Temple I had training. My...teacher had many enemies."

Master Kleon studied Anakin for a few seconds before shaking his head and raising his eyebrows in incredulity as he looked at the

paragraph again. "He must have been a strict teacher for you to have learned so much."

Anakin didn't answer, but instead nodded.

"I'm guessing some of these words were his exactly?"

Another nod.

"Well, that makes more sense. Still, this is far more advanced than anything I've seen from you so far," he frowned and looked reproachfully at his young student. "Have you been holding yourself back, Anakin?"

Anakin wasn't sure he much cared for the way the master used his first name, but he dismissed it and thought about how to answer the question. His lie would be too obvious if he said 'no' with the proof right in front of them. He could probably pass it off as a single subject he'd been forced to study in great depth by his previous teacher, but he'd been trying to be more honest, and the Knight had come right out and asked. After a moment of hesitation he nodded yet again.

"Why?"

The former Sith shrugged. "Because it's what everyone would expect," he said quietly. "I don't like drawing attention." Anymore. He really had changed since his original childhood. He wasn't sure if it was for the better.

The master shook his head. "Anakin, I don't want you to hold back anymore. I will expect everything in the future to be up to this caliber of writing. Is that understood?"

Uncomfortably, Anakin continued to nod his answers, refusing to meet the Master's eye. It wasn't out of shame, as the Jedi undoubtedly thought, but out of anger that he tried to suppress. Anger at himself for making such a stupid mistake.

"Yes, Master," he finally said when the Jedi didn't stop staring expectantly at him.

"Good," the gran said and gestured towards the door. "You may leave now. May the Force be with you."

"And you, Master," Anakin said with a bow before turning and walking out of the room only to almost run into Thoran. For a moment they

both stood there and stared at each other before Anakin broke the silence.

"How much of that did you hear?"

"I'm a bothan," Thoran responded as if that answered Anakin's question...and truthfully, it kind of did. Bothans were practically bred to gather information, and the trait wasn't discouraged in Jedi bothans. They tended to have exceptionally good hearing, excellent sight and sharp minds.

Anakin responded by letting his blank mask fall over his face before turning and striding off down the hall.

"I guessed you had previous training," the tall youngling said, easily keeping up with Anakin.

"Your point?"

"You used to be a slave too?"

Anakin grit his teeth. He wasn't even going to bother wondering where Thoran had learned that one. Bothans never revealed their sources. He also kept his mouth shut, which was, apparently, answer enough.

"So how could you get training?"

He answered this time for two reasons: To solidify his cover and to appease the other being so he would (if Anakin was lucky) chatter less. "There was an old man on my home planet. He used to be a Jedi and he taught me everything I know." Well, everything about the light side, and he hadn't exactly been old when he'd taught Anakin.

After the Death Star's destruction, Vader had been searching for more information on where Obi-wan had hid for so long. It hadn't been difficult to follow the trail back to Tatooine as that had been where the smuggler's ship blasted from before it had been caught near what was left of Alderaan. He'd ordered his subordinates to find out all they could about Obi-wan, or 'Ben Kenobi' (and Vader had kicked himself for skimming over the search on Tatooine for Jedi before). There had been enough evidence to conclude that Obi-wan had been living there, and at the time, he had almost seen it as a fitting punishment for hiding his son from him...almost.

Thoran hummed half-heartedly. "You're either really smart, or you

have a secret," the bothan commented thoughtfully after a few seconds of quiet.

"Everyone has secrets," Anakin responded tersely.

"Yeah, but you learn too fast." Was Anakin wrong, or did he sense a touch of jealousy. Unbecoming of a Jedi, but understandable from a just-turned eleven-year-old. He also sensed no malice behind it. He found it strange as he'd never thought anyone could feel anything akin to jealousy without some form of malice to accompany it. "It's like you knew it all before or something."

At that Anakin slowed and then stopped in the hall. He felt Thoran stop too as Anakin turned to stare at him. He fought to keep the incredulity off of his face, but he had to take a look at this other being. The other initiates had to be conspiring together. There just wasn't any other way they could keep blindsiding him with the truth.

Of course, if initiates could come up with guesses that tended to be a little too close for comfort, maybe that meant Palpatine wasn't as great as he'd made himself out to be. Then again no one could be as great as what that man had boasted of.

After a few moments, he just shook his head and turned to continue on his way.

"You're not going to tell me your secret, are you," Thoran finally concluded.

"No."

"It's okay. I'll figure it out some day."

Anakin, torn between exasperation and frustration, was about to respond when a buzzing from his pocket let him know he had a message waiting for him. Frowning, he glanced back up at the bothan who was still following him.

"Hey, I have an appointment soon and...it's been a long day. While I appreciate your company, I would like to be alone as I walk to prepare for the session."

Thoran cocked his head in a strangely animal-like manner before nodding. "See you around, then."

"Yeah," Anakin responded as the other boy hurried down the halls.

After a moment, he took the comm out and checked it. Then his eyes widened, although he wasn't sure as to whether that was from concern or triumph. Count Dooku, it seemed, had posted something on the proper holoweb site, and wanted to meet again in two days.

Chapter End Notes

Thansk again to Batfan7! You guys have no idea...I would NOT be able to do this without her!

So, more set-up. I also wanted more interaction with the kids as Anakin is doing his best to make allies he can trust and he is juggling so much at the moment...it's going to catch up with him eventually. Sorry there wasn't a lot of action in this chapter and the next chapter is all about his session with Girth with a little bit of Sidious thrown in at the end...yeah. Probably not going to get a whole lot of action for a while. I'm trying not to linger too long, but I fear I am failing miserably.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin was not looking forward to his mind-healing session with Healer Girth. If it was anything like his session with Master Xio...well, he *truly* did not want to go back to see her. He hadn't felt that exposed since the Emperor had discovered Luke's existence and he'd be lying if he said that it didn't scare him on some level. He was convinced that she would go on about his Dark Side training and try to tell him how horrible it was, despite her assurances. He was also convinced that that wasn't all she would do and he had no idea how to handle any actions she might take.

Now he was waiting outside the room Girth was using as his own office. Thankfully it wasn't the same one he'd gone to for Master Xio's session. He hadn't been waiting for long before the door opened and a fur-covered, rodent-like head popped out.

"Ah, Anakin," Girth said in his high-pitched, happy voice. "You're here. Come in, come in."

Stiffly, Anakin followed him into a room decorated similarly to Master Xio's, if a bit more elaborately. It didn't help his uneasiness. The room was carpeted with an ornate rug in the center. Two armchairs had been set up opposite of each other with a caff table in the center. The rest of the room had a warm but simple feeling to it. Holo-pictures of beautiful, grassy landscapes and waterfalls decorated the walls. It was a change from the typical Jedi décor and Anakin found he rather liked it despite his uneasiness. Also, on the caff table sat a tray with an assortment of simple confections as well as two mugs. Three different jugs (actual *clay* jugs—Anakin hadn't seen anything like that since Tatooine) had also been set out next to the tray. One of them had steam rising out of it.

"Have a seat. Take whichever one you want," Girth urged. "I think you'll like some of the drinks I've gotten for you to sample as well, so grab a mug."

Anakin wasn't feeling all that hungry at the moment, but he rarely passed up a chance to eat something these days, and not taking anything would broadcast his nervousness, so he walked up to the

table and grabbed a mug before checking each of the jugs. He was rather surprised at the first one he looked into.

"Pollie Juice?" he asked incredulously. Because Pollies grew on Tattooine, they had very little water in their makeup. To get anything juice-like from them, they had to be crushed and combined with water or ice. The result was normally a sort of slush that the children considered a great treat. It was rare enough on Tatooine, and he'd never seen it anywhere else. He glanced up at Girth who nodded, a large smile on his face, which showed almost all of his over-sized, mostly flat teeth.

Unsure of what to think, Anakin looked into the next jug, the one with steam. He recognized that one as a sort of sweet tea-like drink, again native to Tatooine, that was popular amongst the younger generations. The third had blue Bantha Milk.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"I had them imported," Girth said with a smile. "I know you probably don't get things like that here on Courscant and thought it would be a treat for you. Mind you, I probably won't be able to do so every week, but I wanted our first session to be memorable."

Anakin was impressed despite himself and found he'd already relaxed quite a bit at the other being's open and welcoming manner. It was a very nice gesture and reminded him of something Padme might do. She'd always gone out of her way to surprise her friends and give them very thoughtful gifts.

"Thank you," he said as he poured some of the milk into his mug and picked up a confection. It wasn't from Tatooine, but it did look delicious.

"Alright," Girth said as he picked up his own mug and poured the milk into it as well. He didn't so much as flinch at the strange blue color, which amused Anakin. He wondered how much conditioning the rodent-like being had had to put himself through to do that. Few people liked or appreciated something like milk having such a strange color. "I know that we went over what you can expect from our combined session last time, but I'd just like to reiterate, if you don't mind."

Anakin shrugged and sipped at his drink.

Girth nodded and smiled warmly. "First of all, it's obvious that my

views differ from traditional Jedi views. With that in mind, I have to say that my therapy and counseling tends to focus on understanding. If one can understand why they do things, or why someone else does something, it will be the largest step towards true peace. Once one understands something, they can begin to fix it. Does that make sense?"

Anakin nodded truthfully. After all, no one could fix a speeder if they didn't know what was causing the problem to begin with. Still, it wasn't like he could really tell Mr. Girth exactly what was wrong with him, so again, he felt all of this was rather useless.

Girth continued. "Good. Now, I'd like to say that we won't ever touch on your Force Powers here..." Anakin raised an eyebrow but said nothing. The Jedi didn't like to think of their Force Sensitivity as 'powers'. That was more of a Sith thing. It was amusing to see what the rest of the universe thought of Jedi abilities though. Girth went on after only a small pause, "But it's such a fundamental part of your life that I can't say it won't come up. Mostly Master Xio will be discussing that with you, but I want you to be prepared for the eventuality. However, I wanted to emphasize that that will not be our focus." Anakin felt the tension that had appeared when he'd mentioned Master Xio begin to drain away at that.

"I don't know much about your life before this, except that you were a slave on Tatooine, correct?" Anakin nodded in affirmation. "I see," Girth said as he lapped at his own drink. "I have helped slaves before, but every situation where a former slave has had to readjust to being freed has been different. Many slaves hate that state of being and fight it, some simply accept it and some even find the fact that they don't have to make their own decisions freeing. I want to know what your experiences were. Could you elaborate on that for me? What was a normal day for you like?"

Anakin considered not answering, but his memories of life as a slave didn't hold as much pain or embarrassment as they used to. He didn't see much of a point in keeping silent (he had to at least act like he was trying to keep the Council off of his back), so he shrugged and told the mind-healer how he would wake up at the crack of dawn and head over to Watto's shop where he would spend the day going through junk piles, fixing broken or scavenged machinery, fusing things together, figuring everything out on the go, etc. Then, once Watto closed the store, he'd usually have the last few hours of the day to himself.

All in all, it hadn't been too bad. Anakin had seen how most slaves owners treated their slaves and he and his mother had been lucky when Watto had won them. He knew that. He'd known that for a long time, which was why he hadn't ever held more than a residue of resentment for the toydarian.

"He wasn't that bad, as slave masters go," Anakin said thoughtfully and with only the slightest frown. "He didn't beat us or lend us out to other slave owners as payment, although he did limit what we could own and where we could go. He never acknowledged us as actual beings either, and while his punishments were not usually life-threatening, they were...unpleasant." Anakin sensed the healer's request before the drall even opened his mouth, so Anakin decided to expound.

"He would take rations away for weeks at a time, he could be extremely verbally abusive and he would often make me race competitively, on the pod circuits if mom really upset him. He knew doing anything to me almost killed her, but he kept us together. Even before he knew I could be useful to him, he never sold either one of us. I think he acted the way he did to protect his investment—I could fix more than most slaves two and three times my age, and mom kept excellent books—but we still benefited from his mind set, to an extent."

Girth nodded. "I agree that yours is definitely one of the better experiences of slavery that I've ever heard, which, sadly, is not saying much."

Anakin felt a tug at his lips, although he could feel no mirth in the expression. It was a relief to hear his own opinion confirmed.

"Well that's a day in your life," Girth said suddenly and then glanced down at the data pad laying on the small side-table next to his chair. "Why don't you tell me about the people you interacted with. You mentioned other slaves, namely your mother?"

Anakin had seen this coming, and it didn't bother him in the slightest to carry on about how amazing his mother had been and how she would do anything for him and how she had always believed in him. Half way through his spoken words, he realized that he felt far more relaxed and at home than he'd felt since he came back in time—and probably more *content* than he'd ever been at the Jedi Temple before. Right about then, he realized that he'd never actually spoken about his mother like this before, even to Padme because by that time it had

become too painful. The Jedi had discouraged him from speaking of his mother because she was an attachment, but that hadn't stopped him from having feelings for her (as his run-in with the Tuscan Raiders that had kidnapped her had proved).

"It sounds like you love her very much," Girth said once Anakin had begun to wind down.

Anakin's smile faded at his words. Even now it felt wrong to say he loved someone. It had always been different with Padme and she had been the only exception because while the secrecy had been difficult, it had also added a level of excitement to the relationship as well. He still hadn't told her often how much he loved her in so many words...well, he hadn't instigated saying so in any case. It felt even more wrong now because he saw his love as a passion, and passion was the Sith mantra, not the Jedi. He may not believe completely in the Jedi way of life at the moment, but he would prefer to revert to their beliefs than acknowledge anything even closely resembling the Sith. It still rubbed him wrong either way. Since when had he become such a coward?

"Anakin?"

He still didn't speak.

"What's wrong?"

Oh, right, Girth wouldn't know why he'd suddenly clammed up.

"Jedi don't believe in attachment," he said.

The drall's eyebrows furrowed in puzzlement and his whiskers twitched a little faster. "Yes, I know that, but I thought that that particular rule related more to partnerships and romantic relationships."

To his credit, Anakin didn't flinch at that. "No, they mean almost any relationship. It's a weakness that can be exploited."

Girth frowned in outright disapproval at that. "But what about the bond between a master and a padawan?"

Anakin glanced back at him, confused. The mind-healer must have recognized what his patient didn't understand because he answered the unspoken question. "Master Xio explained that particular aspect to me when I asked her for more information about how Masters and

Knights choose padawans."

Ah, that made sense. Anakin nodded and looked away again. "Padawans and their Masters are encouraged to not form deep emotional bonds. Once a padawan becomes a knight, they rarely see their former Master." Obi-wan and Anakin had been an exception because of the Clone Wars. He knew of several Jedi who hadn't approved of 'The Negotiator' and 'The Hero With No Fear' (ha, what a laugh!) continuing to be sent to the front lines together, but few had raised serious objections because it had been a time of war...and truthfully, the Jedi hadn't known how to really handle it.

"And how do you feel about that?"

Anakin scoffed. "I think it's ridiculous to send two people into situations where their lives depend on the other and expect them to not form emotional bonds."

"Hmm. Perhaps you and I feel differently than the Jedi because we were raised differently?" Girth asked.

Ah, so he agreed but didn't want to come out in direct opposition to the Jedi. Smart being.

"You mean to say that as someone who grew up outside the Temple that my mind set is inherently different. I agree, to an extent, however I don't think even Jedi are immune to these deeply-rooted bonds."

Girth just stared at the ten-year-old* with an unreadable expression for several minutes. The unusual scrutiny puzzled Anakin until he went back over his words and cringed. That hadn't sounded like a child in the slightest. He'd been too caught up in the conversation and had let his guard down. He *really* needed to stop doing that.

Finally the drall spoke again, his words slow. "So you are suggesting that all the Jedi are in denial?"

Anakin couldn't help his amused smirk at that. "Some. I've noticed in my creche group that the other younglings don't seem to realize they have emotions unrelated to the Force. If they do notice...well, they are encouraged not to."

Girth frowned again and Anakin felt a spike of displeasure through the Force. Well, it was nice to see someone else agreed with him.

"Well, I don't want to say the Temple teachings are wrong. I only

know a small sliver of them, after all, but ignoring your feelings or pretending they don't exist will not help you in the long run. No matter your goal, whether it is to 'overcome' such feelings or to achieve a healthy state of mind, acknowledging that you have these feelings is the first step. Pretending such feelings don't exist is..." he paused, probably looking for a nicer word than 'ludicrous' or 'stupid'. "Unwise," he finally finished.

"This is something I will have to bring to Master Xio's attention." He added that last part on as an after thought and Anakin wasn't sure the mind-healer was speaking to himself or to Anakin. After a moment, though, he looked back up at his patient and went on.

"Perhaps Jedi who grow up with the differing world view have other ways of acknowledging and dealing with their feelings," the mind-healer's tone only thinly hid the fact that he did not believe that in the slightest, but Anakin appreciated that he was trying to look at the situation objectively. "But if they do, I am not convinced that such a method will work with you as you have, as you said, an inherently different mind-set."

Anakin wanted to kick himself for that slip-up. Ah well. He couldn't exactly take it back.

"With that in mind, let's go back to my original question: How do you feel about your mother? Please be as accurate as you possibly can. You don't have to be extremely specific, but just tell me in honesty."

He wasn't sure he understood the question. "Everything she did was for me. How am I supposed to feel towards her?"

Girth smiled at that and seemed to relax. Apparently he had been expecting Anakin to say something like that.

"That is for you to express. I know it seems difficult, but you need to acknowledge how you feel about her. Use simple, generic terms to begin with and we can move on from there."

He still wasn't sure he was comprehending the other being's meaning, but it would still be several minutes until the session ended and Girth was expecting him to say something. He turned his mind back to his mother, picturing her tanned face only just beginning to show age lines, despite the harsh conditions of the planet she resided on.

"She's amazing," he finally said. He couldn't get more generic or honest than that.

Girth's mouth twitched into the drall's equivalent of a knowing smile.

"Yes, but how do *you* feel about her? What do you feel towards her?"

Suddenly it clicked as to what the drall was trying to get Anakin to do. Part of him didn't want to say it for multiple reasons (it would be a huge blow to his pride to even admit it aloud, it would be going against everything he'd ever been taught at the Temple, it was admitting to a passion he still harbored, etc.) but part of him curled with anticipation.

"You're right," he finally said, referring to Girth's previous observation. "I do love her. Very much. She was everything to me—my whole world. I miss her...and I always will."

The smile on the mind-healer's face shown with a genuine pride that Anakin had seen very rarely from anyone (with the exception of his mother) in his life.

"Well done, Anakin. You've taken a very large step forward. I don't think you realize just how large. Now, why don't you tell me how you feel about having to leave her behind when you came to the Temple."

Anakin was sure that the second repetition of any activity was supposed to be easier than the first. He'd examined and expressed his feelings for his mother (and that had been surprisingly difficult to speak aloud), and he'd succeeded. However, trying to think similarly to describe how he felt about leaving Tatooine didn't seem any less difficult.

"Um...nervous?" he realized just how juvenile that had sounded and wondered why he was suddenly able to put his facade forward without meaning to. He'd also said that in all honesty...so did that make it a facade? He frowned at the thought, unsure of how to proceed.

"Understandable," Girth said with a knowing nod. "But I think you can be more specific."

Anakin didn't want to say he'd been scared to death, but the thought occurred to him nonetheless. He realized that he would have to admit that at some point, but wasn't sure he could at the moment, so he focused more on his mother and Tatooine in general.

"I hated living on Tatooine," he finally said. "It's hot and harsh and you can't trust anyone. It's every being for himself, and few who don't

believe that survive," he said bitterly. Then his features softened. "That's why mom was so amazing. She was so different from everyone else. And she never changed, no matter what happened." She'd been the softness that blunted the sharp edges of life on Tatooine; the refreshing taste of water on an otherwise dry, desolate planet—in more ways than just the physical.

"I hated leaving her behind just as much as I hated the idea of staying. And I hate the idea that she's still there."

He did not like using the word 'hate', as he tended to associate such a feeling with the Sith, but Girth had asked him to be as honest as he could be, and even he knew he'd be lying if he used a weaker word. It was depressing that he'd had such tendencies towards the Dark Side, even at that young age, and still harbored those emotions now. Still, even as he said it, he felt lighter somehow. It was strange and he couldn't help his amazed confusion at the unfamiliar sensation.

"Very good, Anakin. You're doing better than I expected. However, let's focus on more positive feelings. Acknowledging the negative is very important, but focusing on the good will help just as much if not more so.

"So I'm curious, how did you feel when you learned you were no longer a slave?"

He couldn't help scoffing. "I was being freed."

The drall raised one of his furry eyebrows, whiskers twitching in amusement. "Feelings, Anakin. How did you feel?"

And yet again, he found the idea of expressing such things just as challenging as before. He grit his teeth in frustration.

"Excited, I guess. Relieved. Happy...until I found out mom couldn't come with me."

"How did you feel then?"

He frowned. How had he felt at that point? "Upset, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Well, why could they free me, but not my mom?" he felt his frustration grow and clenched his fists.

"You know why, though, don't you?"

And the resentment faded because Qui-gon really had tried to free his mother, so the enmity he felt there was undue. "Yes. I...felt upset. Angry, even." And the first time around he had even held a spark of bitterness towards Qui-gon for not being able to free both of them.

"But mom told me to be brave and not look back."

"She sounds like an incredible woman."

Anakin nodded, his lips tugging into a small, wistful smile. "Yes. She is." Oh and how it felt so *good* to say that in present tense!

"How do you feel about those events now?"

The Jedi frowned at that question. How *did* he feel about what happened? Annoyed? Perhaps a little. Bitter? Not particularly. Angry? No, not that either, not anymore. He was still worried for his mother, still upset that his mother had to stay on Tatooine as a slave, but as for everything else...

He shrugged. "It's in the past. I'll never forget that it happened, but I'm not upset about it anymore. At least, I don't think I am."

"Excellent!" Girth clapped his paws together twice, creating a soft thumping sound. Then he continued with a cheerful grin. "Well, the time's up and we're about done with our session. I'm going to take you in to talk to D-40 now, but when you do talk to the droid, please keep in mind that you need to examine how you feel about whatever you're telling it. Use terms like 'happy', 'sad', 'angry', 'upset', 'annoyed', etc. but be as honest as you can be. If you're not sure how to say what you're feeling you can bring it to me and we'll find out together.

"A few things you have to know before I let you go, though. The first is that not acknowledging your feelings is not the same as not having them. Pretending you don't have emotions is nothing short of illogical. All sapients have some sort of subconscious internal processing procedure that results in neural chemical reactions, which we translate into feelings. Not realizing and admitting your feelings—even if only in your mind—is the same as lying to yourself. And if you can't be honest with yourself, you will never be able to reach your full potential.

"The second is that your feelings do not make you any less of a Jedi, no matter what the Temple teachings might say. Consciously

recognizing what you're feeling can help you in so many ways, not the least of which is to overcome what you feel and be able to move on as you did today. Acknowledging the 'hows' and 'whys' is the basis of understanding, and once you understand, you can move on.

"Do you understand what I am trying to say?" the drall asked, large brown eyes boring into Anakin's with sincerity.

Anakin nodded. "Yes," was all he said. The healer didn't look completely convinced, but after a moment, he got up and motioned for Anakin to follow him to the next room where he would spend the next hour with his mechanical therapist. Thankfully, working on mechanics had always helped Anakin think, and Girth had given him a lot to think on. He continued to run the conversation back through his mind long after he'd practically taken D-40 apart and wired it to speak only in Huttese.

xXx

Jedi Master Tai'k Xio was not pleased. She had been having a rather pleasant and fairly normal day when her fellow mind-healer had just come from a session with their mutual patient and had proceeded to declare everything she believed in wrong. Admittedly, he hadn't said it in so many words, but the intention had been there.

And still was.

"Master Xio, I do not mean to be disrespectful, but I cannot help but draw the conclusion that you encourage your students and younglings to deny that they have any feelings at all."

"Feelings are a weakness," she said with as much patience as she could muster. "They bring bias and disharmony to any given situation. As Jedi, we cannot afford that." He was a logical being. Surely he couldn't dispute the truth to her words.

"But any sentient being that ignores that they do, in fact, have emotions will only exist in a state of denial that is not healthy," Healer Girth countered. "The assumption that 'an emotion unacknowledged is an emotion that isn't there' is wrong, and I can prove it scientifically, historically and psychologically if you would like proof. In most beings, those ignored emotions will simply build until they explode. As Jedi, I doubt you can afford that either."

"Which is why we teach our younglings to release their emotions to the Force. Feelings are to be accepted and then given to that which

sustains life to do with as It wills."

"Accepting is not always acknowledging," the smaller mind-healer replied. "At least not in this case. Having feelings is not a negative thing, Master Xio. It is a part of being sapient. Denying that is not healthy for growth of the body, mind or spirit."

It was taking some great effort for the Jedi master to remain calm. She did not appreciate having her lifestyle questioned. "With all due respect, Healer Girth, our way of life has sustained us for over a thousand years. Who are we to question what works?"

"A sapient," the drall responded immediately. "Sapients exist to question and change. Just because something worked for centuries or millenia doesn't mean it will always work."

Master Xio shook her head. "I don't believe we will ever agree on this topic," she said softly.

The drall closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I believe you are right, and I am not here to question the Temple or the Jedi teachings. I'm sorry if it came across that way. All I am saying is that because Anakin didn't grow up in the Temple, your normal method of training will not work. He has been taught to feel—to follow his heart. Now you can try to train that out of him, if you like, but I can guarantee you will not like the result. His feelings are his moral compass, and taking that away will not help him or you in the slightest."

Master Xio frowned. She wasn't sure she agreed with that either, but she could see the truth in his words as clearly as she could see the truth in her own.

Healer Girth must have interpreted her expression correctly because he spoke again, obviously trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. "Isn't that why you brought me here to begin with? Because you didn't know how to help him; because he has an inherently different mind-set?" Something about that phrase seemed to calm him down and add just the barest touch of amusement to his tone before it vanished.

The Jedi remained silent, mainly because he was correct in that statement.

"You know you can't just expect someone to change into whatever you want them to be," the furry mind-healer said, his voice softer now. "By taking Anakin in, you have acknowledged that you do have to deal

with him differently. He will always be unusual and I doubt he will ever be even remotely similar to the other Jedi. As such, you cannot treat him in the same manner."

"Treating him differently could cause dissent among the Jedi," Master Xio pointed out.

Healer Girth shook his head. "With all due respect, Master, you Jedi should have thought of that before you accepted him into your ranks."

They sat there in silence for a few minutes before the drall sighed and shook his head. "Please bring my observations before the Council. And thank you for listening to me, even though you do not agree."

He said the words with a little more than his usual sincerity, and Master Xio couldn't help but nod in ascent.

"Have a pleasant day," the mind-healer said as he left.

"May the Force be with you," the Jedi returned as the door closed. After a few moments of contemplation, she turned and requested an audience with the Jedi Council. She had promised, after all, and whether or not she agreed, he had brought up some valid points.

xXx

Senator Palpatine leaned back in his chair and contemplated the report he'd just received. Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas was dead after a rather over-powered ambush set up by Sidious himself, leaving the paranoid Jedi Master's link to the fledgling clone army open for manipulation. It was one loose end he was glad to be rid of. Now he could turn his attentions to Dooku's former brat, the Bando Gora Priestess. He'd put it off for a while, hoping he'd have the former Jedi Master on his side by now. Having Dooku cut off and kill his own bonds himself would only strengthen Sidious' hold over him as well as his connection to the Dark Side.

Now, though, he wasn't so sure he could afford to wait that long. Vader's sudden appearance had thrown Sidious' plans into chaos. His positions were not nearly as solid as he had guessed they would be and it frustrated him to no end. It had only been a few months since the Naboo Blockade and he was almost no further along now as he had been then. He was sure he'd win the next election, which would come at the end of the year, but it would have been so much easier if the brat Queen would have done what she *should* have done. Still, he's been patient and he could continue to be so, but whether it be Vader,

Dooku or someone else, he needed an apprentice by the end of the year.

He contemplated the now blank screen again, chin held in his hand and a finger resting over his lips thoughtfully. Komari Vosa had been a Senior Padwan rank when she'd been ousted by the Jedi Order. He knew she was not in her right mind, but that would only make her more pliable and controllable. Plus she had the bonus of already being under the thrall of the Dark Side of the Force; he wouldn't have to turn her. She wouldn't be a long-term solution, but she was an option, although he wasn't sure she was strong enough mentally to begin Sith Training.

Perhaps a test would be in order? He was looking for a good candidate for the clones as well. Hmm. Yes, he could kill two birds with one stone. A bounty, perhaps? A very *large* bounty that would draw attention of just the right sort of people...

He didn't allow himself to grin. He had more discipline than that. Still, he couldn't help the surge of smug triumph at his possible (probable) solution to this particular problem. He stood and walked towards the door of his office. He would need to get in contact with a few people to set this up, but he was fairly confident it would work (as long as Vader didn't stick his nose into this as well). Once he had this taken care of he could continue to try and figure out how to remove the other thorns in his side and to turn them into seedlings that would benefit him instead.

Chapter End Notes

*I went through and figured out that Anakin would actually turn ten about a month after TPM ended, give or take a few weeks. Going to go back and fix this in the rest of the story, but for now just know that Anakin has had his birthday and turned ten before he made any friends.

A/N: Okay, so I want to explain a few things about this. First, I am NOT a psychology major nor a counselor in any professional way. The closest I come to that is being an ear for my friends when they need to vent, and I do that quite often. I'm usually pretty decent at seeing the psychology behind actions, but it's based more on experience and the classes I have taken and some counseling I've been to myself. I did get a little help on this from my beta reader who has actually been to her share of counseling. She said I may have rushed into getting to the 'big stuff', but I

disagreed because of how Anakin thinks of his mother. Especially at this point. It may have been a bigger deal when he was younger, but at this point he's just so ecstatic she's alive that the worst thing about his relationship to her is the fact that he had to leave her behind. Well, that and the whole 'you can't love' thing, but I'm going to be going into that one later.

Anyway, I greatly appreciate comments. :) And thanks to Batfan7 for beta-reading! She's amazing!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took him a full half hour longer to reach his racing circuit that night, but between his memories of sneaking out from his previous life and the 3D map he'd downloaded onto his data pad earlier that day, he managed to successfully find a new route. Bleersh immediately informed Anakin that it would be a slow night, and the assembled competitors were scheduled to only race twice. After some internal debate, Anakin decided to lose one of the races (despite it grating on him to do so purposefully) so as to draw a little less attention to himself.

The first race had more money involved, so he won that one and lost the second. Bleersh, thankfully, didn't say anything to him other than his usual spiel about the cred chip. Anakin left by a different exit and made sure that his route back to the Temple was hidden, difficult to follow and full of small exit points he could use that other, larger beings would find difficult to exploit. Unfortunately that meant he had to resort to crawling through vents again. He muttered dryly to himself as he moved back through the buildings towards the Jedi Temple that he would know the Courscanti ventilation system better than any droid in existence by the time he reached his sixteenth birthday if this kept up.

Fortunately, he got a decent amount of sleep that night and went through his classes the next day in a surprisingly good mood. It took him a few hours to realize and analyze his frame of mind. It couldn't be the racing the night before, he concluded; while winning the one circuit had brought on his usual elation, the loss had soured the whole evening. Despite this, he felt...calm and light, as if a weight had been lifted from his soul, and couldn't attribute it to anything other than his supposed 'therapy' session. He wasn't sure what surprised him more, the fact that his session with the mind-healer had actually helped, or the fact that the difference in his life was so significant that he had actually noticed it. If Healer Girth's sessions would do this to him every time, he would have few problems going back to see him.

His group of fellow initiates seemed to enjoy his newly brightened mood, although he could tell that they also found it a bit strange. Still, their reaction to this change was to be even more sociable than

normal, but, to his surprise, their actions (which would normally have him repeating a mantra in his head about how he had changed and did not use the Dark Side to crush windpipes anymore) hardly bothered him at all.

The end of the second day after Girth's confrontation would have normally ended in a session with Master Xio, but he had asked that they reschedule as soon as he'd gotten his message from Dooku. She had complied to his request that they postpone for a day with some hesitation. Still, he'd been able to convince her (with the excuse of homework) and was then able to focus on his upcoming meeting with the former Jedi Master. He couldn't be more glad that his machinations would give him plenty of time to sneak out of the Temple and finalize preparations for the evening.

Meeting with Dooku again would be tricky, but he hadn't been a General in a war or a Dark Lord and second in command of a Galactic Empire for nothing. It had been a while since he'd been required (or able) to go anywhere incognito, and sneaking around was never his style, but that didn't mean he couldn't do it. He couldn't draw attention to himself at the moment, no matter how he wanted to just go in swinging his lightsaber. Not to mention that killing or even purposefully hurting anyone (even Palpatine's bounty hunters) at the moment was something he wanted to avoid. Sith tended to go out of their way to kill and torture and as Vader, the practice had been a rather effective, if perverse, way of relieving stress (at least to begin with, it had lost its potency and become a simple habit after a while). He didn't like the idea of falling back into the pattern. It would make any fall back to the Dark Side that much easier.

The sun had almost sunk to the horizon when he slipped out of the Jedi Temple and made for his rented storage shed. It didn't take him too long to collect his mechanical limb extensions. He had made sure to clean them previously and so needed little preparation other than to place them gently into the large shoulder-bag he'd had the foresight to bring. He'd also brought his lightsaber just in case, although he knew igniting it when in a disguise he could only barely run in would allow him to do little more than deflect a few shots and cut through inanimate objects, but that was better than nothing. He made a note to try and learn to wield his saber while in disguise. He'd probably only be able to get some basics down, but it would be better than nothing and it would reinforce the story he'd told Dooku.

He'd sneaked out the night before to do some reconnaissance, and now he couldn't help but be glad that he'd been paranoid enough to

over-prepare. Dooku had given a time in his message and Anakin had been thankful that he hadn't asked to meet during the day. Getting away would have been far more difficult in that case, and he hadn't given the man any sort of alias he was comfortable with posting on the holoweb to affirm or deny that he could make it to the meeting.

The first thing he did after picking up his disguise was travel to and check his planned escape route, scanning for and dismantling any cameras at the necessary points. He left the bag and his lightsaber hidden, grabbed a pre-written note on a folded piece of flimsy and set off towards the intended meeting place in civilian clothes.

As he did his best to trod along like any other, carefree child in the universe he found, not for the first time, that he felt immensely grateful for the fact that he didn't have a padawan haircut. He would have had to invest in a wig or two in that case. Actually, he may want to do so anyway as it would give him options if he had to do this again in the future (likely). He filed the thought away as something he would consider at a later date.

It only took him a few minutes to get to the proper street. First, he glanced around and opened himself to the Force. It would be difficult to locate anyone in the crowded street, but they had to have a few lookouts in place. It took him longer than he cared to admit, but eventually he found three people in the vicinity located at strategic places above and below the walkway who were giving off a cold anticipation. Whether they were all bounty hunters or assassins waiting for him was irrelevant as he would need to avoid them anyway. With a nod he turned and walked with a now purposeful pace, pausing to consider a few restaurants, as if searching for something.

When he reached the correct restaurant, he allowed himself to smile in triumph and rushed inside, bypassing the waiting customers with little thought for them. It wasn't a high-class diner, but it was respectable enough and seemed to be doing rather well that night at least.

"Excuse me," he said to the young, probably under-paid host behind a podium. The youth looked down at Anakin with an expression of annoyed confusion, but to his credit, he still responded politely.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to meet a Mr. Dooku," he said confidently.

The host eyed him skeptically for a moment before shrugging. "This way," he said and lead Anakin through the maze of full tables towards a more private area in the back. Once they approached, he saw the Count sitting with a calm air of disinterest as he fingered a glass of wine on the table in front of him. It didn't look like the drink had been touched.

Anakin refused to allow any expression but excited anxiousness onto his face as he and the host approached the table. After a moment, Dooku glanced up. His eyes brushed over Anakin for just a moment and he frowned in confusion before he turned his attention to the older boy.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I believe the other member of your party has arrived," the restaurant host replied.

Dooku's frown deepened. "There must be a mistake," he started, but Anakin cut in before he could go on.

"He said you'd say that."

The Count turned narrowed eyes back to Anakin, probably disapproving of his lack of respect. "Who did?"

"Mr. Lars. He gave me a lot of credits to give you this," Anakin said with a wide grin as he held up the note. Dooku didn't move to take it for a moment and Anakin took the opportunity to glance at the wine glass and then back at Dooku. "He said you may want to finish your dinner first though." It would draw less attention if the Count stayed to eat and the Bounty Hunters thought 'Luke Lars' was just delayed.

The frown didn't completely leave the Count's face, but the disapproval was replaced with a wary curiosity as he finally reached forward and took the flimsy. Both of the boys watched in silence as Dooku read the note. It informed him that he was being followed and then it had a small, printed map at the bottom that would lead him where he needed to go. For the man's peace of mind, the route went through public roads. It would be up to Dooku as to whether he should follow Anakin after he reached the end of the map, but it was about the best Anakin could come up with with his limited assets in two days.

After a moment, the Count re-folded the flimsy and stuck it in his breast pocket before looking up and nodding. "Thank you, young

man," he said to Anakin and then turned his gaze back to the host. "Please inform my waitress that I will order now."

"Of course," the host said with a respectful nod. "Will he be joining you?"

Anakin realized the young man must be referring to him, but he didn't speak.

"No, that will be all," Dooku said dismissively.

"Yes, sir," the host said again before turning to Anakin. "Allow me to show you the way out."

"Okay, thanks!" Anakin put in as much exuberance as he could into his words as he followed the youth back through the restaurant. Now he just had to kill an hour or so. He wondered for a moment when he got onto the walkway outside the restaurant where he should go now. He didn't want to head directly back to the meeting place where he would be waiting for Dooku as the bounty hunters had probably already marked him. If they were watching him, they would be expecting a child who had just gotten a good amount of extra credits, and he had to convince them.

He noted a street stall selling some candies and figured that would be a good place to start. He'd always enjoyed sweets as a child, but hadn't gotten them much in the Temple. Eventually the lack of sugar had tempered his taste for sweet things, but he could handle a few treats and perhaps some confections. Not three stores down he could see a sign for a bakery.

Nodding excitedly, he ran up to the short line in front of the street vendor and made sure he looked impatient as he waited, shifting back and forth from foot to foot. When he reached the front of the line, he bought something cold and sugary that he thought a child might like. Then he sauntered down the street towards the bakery where he got several sweet rolls and a few other desserts. Then he sat down at the small selection of tables in the bakery to eat and figure out where he should go next. What else did children like? Toys? Yes, toys. That would be acceptable. This area of Courscant dealt mostly with food, but he knew of an entrance to a mall not too far away. It wouldn't be difficult to lose any tails he had in there and double back.

Nodding to himself, he finished his current roll before hopping down from the chair and rushing out and into the crowd. A little over half an hour later, after giving the almost full bag of sweets to a random

child that had looked down on their luck, he dug his pack out from its hiding place under the stairway where he'd hidden it and quickly strapped his disguise on. Then he stretched out with the Force and waited for Dooku to come.

xXx

Dooku knew that he'd been tagged and followed since he'd landed on Courscant. He was a Count and a former Jedi. It wasn't exactly unheard of for people to watch high-profile parties such as himself. And if Luke was right and Palpatine was the Sith, he would have expected the man to hire people to watch him. It wasn't anything he couldn't put up with and they hadn't approached him, so he had let them be as well. He hadn't *known* who they were working for after all, and as long as they didn't do anything, he didn't care. Or he hadn't before he'd gotten the note from a certain former Sith.

Your tails are bounty hunters sent by him. *They attacked me last time and are likely*
to do so again if I am seen. If you still wish to meet, follow the map below.

LL

The logical part of him suspected a trap, but his Force senses remained still. The Force wasn't any more clouded than normal, so he kept his lightsaber handy and followed the map. He only had to check it once or twice before putting it in a pocket and leaving it there. He still had his tails, but the note didn't say anything about losing them, so Dooku figured Luke would take care of it.

He frowned at that thought. He'd learned the personal name of the being first, not the surname the child had used (if that *was* his real name) and so continued to think of the being as 'Luke', but it rubbed him wrong. He wasn't familiar with the former Sith and at the moment, he didn't particularly want to be. He made a mental note to start thinking of the being as 'Lars' instead. Even if it wasn't his real name, it felt better, less personal. He wondered why Luke would introduce himself by only a personal name. Dooku scoffed. It was probably because that name was a fake as well.

He'd researched anyone by the name of 'Luke' but there had been hundreds of thousands across the galaxy. Of those, there had been thousands of reported child disappearances (because Sith tended to take children as apprentices so he figured that would narrow down the search results) by that name throughout the Republic as well. He

hadn't cared for the statistics both because he had no idea where to begin looking among those results and the fact that there had been so many children...

Ahead, he saw his destination and brought himself back to the present. He'd never really let his guard down, but if this was a trap, he'd have to have all of his facilities with him to overcome it. Down a side-street of sorts stood a doorway in an otherwise blank, durocreet wall. It had an electronic lock that required an access code, but Lars had provided that information along with the map. He calmly walked up to the door, entered the code and strode inside, closing the door behind him immediately.

"This way," a mechanical voice in the dark almost made Dooku jump. Almost. He hadn't sensed anyone, but now he could see Luke Lars standing at the end of the hall in a turbo lift.

"That is terribly convenient for an ambush," Dooku pointed out.

Lars didn't say anything for just a moment. Then he spoke again, sounding a little frustrated. "You could have walked into an ambush the moment you stepped through the door. They will be here soon. And I will not be caught."

"Why not simply dispense of them?" After all, wasn't that usually what Sith did? Of course, this being wasn't a Sith anymore, so perhaps he wanted to avoid it?

"Palpatine undoubtedly has some form of mobile recording or transmitting device on one or all of them. I do not wish to give any of my skills away."

It was weak, and Dooku knew it, but he also sensed the real reason had far deeper implications, possibly ones Lars himself was still coming to terms with. It was a sense he got through the Force (because he simply didn't know the other being well enough to get that feeling otherwise).

"Very well," Dooku said with a nod. It had been a while since he'd taken a real risk anyway. He wondered what was making him feel so...reckless and (dare he think it) *trusting* of a former Sith.

Jogging down the hallway, he rushed into the lift. Lars pushed the 'closed' button and the floor dropped. Dooku turned towards his companion to ask a question when he noticed that Lars had something in his hand and it was pointed in his direction.

"Is that a scanner?"

"They may have tagged you."

Dooku frowned. Just how amateurish did this being think he was?

A beeping from the instrument had him blinking down at the device in surprise.

"How?" he asked incredulously.

Lars seemed grim. "No matter how good you are, someone is better. There are also such things as lucky shots."

"I do not believe in the idea of 'luck'. It is the will of the Force."

Lars seemed to study him for a minute before he spoke up. "Have you ever considered that perhaps that there are other unseen forces at work besides the Force? That luck is a byproduct of those forces and the Force agreeing? Or at least not disagreeing, perhaps?"

Dooku raised an eyebrow as Lars ran the scanner over his body and stopped at the bottom of the half-cape he wore. Dooku examined the hem as he thought over Lars' question. He was annoyed at himself and his stalkers when he did indeed find a small device. After a few moments, Lars held his hand out, silently asking for the bug.

"When you say 'other forces', do you mean a God or another omnipotent being?" Dooku finally asked.

The being shrugged his shoulders, studying the transmitter Dooku had handed over. He didn't speak for several seconds and Dooku let it go as he didn't want to start a conversation in a lift ride that would probably end soon (although he'd continue it if Lars decided to humor him). He had begun to wonder exactly how far down the former Sith was planning on letting the lift go.

"I wouldn't profess to know," Lars finally answered. "But I do not think the Force is all there is, it is only the most obvious transcendent entity."

Dooku cocked his head. "Are you suggesting that the Force is indeed sentient?" He'd heard the suggestion before, but few Jedi accepted the theory as truth. It was actually a rather entertaining debate subject for some of the padawan classes.

Lars looked up and didn't answer for a moment. Then he held up the little device. "It's just a tracker, not a listening device and it seems to be the only one they were able to get onto you. It could prove to be useful in misleading them."

The Count didn't say anything, refusing to acknowledge Lars' lack of answer. Before he could say anything, though, the former Sith pressed the 'stop' button on the lift and hurried out of the doors when the turbolift halted at the next floor. Dooku followed him into the hallway of what looked like a floor full of old offices. The door closed behind them and Dooku noticed Lars wave his hand. Not twenty seconds after they exited the lift, it continued on its descent without them.

The floor they had stopped on held many old but secure offices of various kinds. Dooku could see a worn dental sign hanging from a front desk through the large, transparent windows of a darkened waiting room. From what he could tell, many of the other doors lead to similar businesses.

"And what, pray tell, would you recommend now?" Dooku heard himself ask dryly. "I would say we have a few minutes at most before they realize what happened."

"Would you be averse to climbing stairs at an accelerated pace?" Lars asked, and Dooku could hear a dry but rueful grin in the distorted voice. Before the Count could answer, Lars had turned to hurry down a hallway. They quickly found the old, drab staircase and used Force-aided leaps to jump several steps at a time. In only a few minutes, they had reached an upper-mid-level where Anakin knew they could hail an air taxi. And that is exactly what he wanted their pursuers to think had happened.

Instead of rushing outside, though, he ran into the correct hall, entered the code to a portal immediately to their left, and stepped inside the darkened doorway as it opened. Once the Count had followed him, he turned around and locked the door before taking out an electric light source and activating it. Dooku looked around, surprised and a little impressed.

"Droid maintenance tunnels?"

He could practically feel the other's smirk of amusement. "Yes. Many people forget that these hallways exist. Once inside, there is little to no security and I have scoured this area already for cameras or bugs of any kind. We can safely talk here."

"Impressive."

"Simply well planned."

"And what would have happened had we met one of my followers while ascending the stairs?"

"I would have incapacitated him before he could communicate with the others."

Dooku shook his head. "It is rarely that easy."

Lars nodded. "I know. I am used to...improvising."

"I see."

"This way, Count," Lars said after a slight pause as he turned and started down the tunnel. "Droid tunnels rarely have access to other levels, but I do not wish to chance that they will somehow find that door and open it." He gestured with his masked head towards the portal they had just entered through.

"Still paranoid, I see," Dooku couldn't help but comment wryly.

Lars shrugged. "I am alive."

Dooku conceded the point and followed the other man deeper through the long, metallic hallway lined with machinery and droid ports, many of which were full of recharging units. Finally they reached what looked like a room to store old droids and spare parts. Skeletons and half assembled robots had been shoved into corners and the whole room looked utterly filthy between the grease and the dust that lined the edges of the box-like room, where no droid or human had recently stirred it up.

Still, Dooku found himself a fairly clean crate and took a seat. Lars did the same after dragging one forward.

"Now, Count, you wished to speak to me? Have you found any evidence to corroborate my claim?"

At this the former Jedi frowned. "No. Nothing definite in any case. The search remains as difficult as ever. I fear I cannot justify or disprove your theory without approaching the man himself."

The other being's fists tightened with a creak of metal. "I see."

"I believed you implied that acting at this moment would be detrimental and I wanted to hear your reasoning."

He didn't have to be Force-sensitive to know Lars had frowned.

"If you acted now, what would you do?"

Dooku was finding that his patience for Lars' tendency to answer inquiries with a question of his own waring very thin, especially since he'd already answered this one.

"As I said before," he said, proud that he couldn't keep only the barest tightness from his voice, "I would take your information to the Council or before the Senate."

"You also pointed out that you need proof, and neither you nor I have any."

"You could testify."

The being scoffed. "Please. It would be my word against his. Who do you think the rest of the Senate would believe?"

"Then I would confront him."

"No!" Lars said loudly, startling Dooku with his insistence. After a moment, he seemed to calm down as he shook his head and slumped a little. "You don't understand. Confronting him would only be playing into his hands."

"Then we spring the trap," the Count responded firmly.

For some reason that seemed to cause Lars to pause and study Dooku fervently.

"You disagree?" the former Jedi finally said, once again keeping his feelings of irritation and annoyance out of his voice and off of his face by sheer will alone.

Lars must have heard it anyway. "Forgive me. You just reminded me of someone for a moment.

"Yes, I do disagree. Palpatine is an agent of darkness. He can twist one's mind almost as easily as the Dark Side itself can. He does his research well and he has a dozen contingency plans in place at any given moment. He is also a master of adapting to new situations. We would be hard pressed to come across a more dangerous man. Simply

waltzing into a situation contrived by him unprepared is suicide...in more ways than you can know."

Oh? And just what kinds of suicide was Lars afraid of? Physical? No. Social? Doubtful. Mental? Probably, although Dooku still couldn't imagine one man, no matter how powerful, being able to do such a thing to him—a former Jedi Master. Besides, unlike Lars, apparently, Dooku did not consider himself a coward, and if he had to die to bring peace to the Galaxy, then so be it. He had given himself to that cause long ago and Jedi or not, he was not about to change that now.

"Are you suggesting we sit by and do nothing?"

Lars let out a sigh, something that sounded quite strange and raspy through the voice modulator.

"I am simply suggesting we continue to try and gather information on him and then wait for the opportune moment to strike."

Dooku shook his head. "I have still found no evidence to indicate that Senator Palpatine is Darth Sidious. I am taking you at your word for all of this. How am I to know you aren't simply misleading me?" And that was what it boiled down to. Dooku was willing to wait for just about anything if he had sure, reliable knowledge about *something.* He didn't exactly have that assurance here.

"Do you have any other leads?" Lars asked with only the barest touch of heat to his voice.

Dooku frowned. That was apparently all the answer Lars needed because he nodded, and when he spoke again, he did so more quietly.

"You are frustrated because you gave up the Jedi Order for this. I understand more than you know. Believe me when I say, I want to take him down just as badly as you do."

"Why?"

Lars seemed taken aback by Dooku's question.

"What?"

"Why do you wish to 'take him down' as you so put it?" Dooku asked nonchalantly, hiding his darker suspicions. "I hear murder is the way to advance in the Sith Order."

It seemed to take the other being a moment to realize what Dooku had implied, but when he did he responded with venom. "I don't want his position. As far as I am concerned, we should happily and completely dispose of anything to do with the Sith Order; eradicate the stain from our midst. All holocrons, all artifacts and all but the least detailed of records.

"Why would I wish to be rid of him? Disregarding the fact that he ruined my life? Or that he kept me mentally chained for decades? Or that he lied, stole, and manipulated his way into power? Or perhaps you are looking for the acknowledgment that under his rule, billions upon billions of sentients will die and whole planets will be destroyed?"

"Quite the impassioned speech," Dooku responded. "But it could still be an act."

Lars clenched his fists. Actually, he had put Dooku's fears to rest at least temporarily, but he didn't need to know that. It gave the Count a little more control over the situation.

"If you cannot trust my information, then what are we doing here?"

Dooku suppressed a slight smile. At least he knew he could get to the being if necessary. He leaned forward on the crate and regarded Luke Lars with a calculating expression.

"I wanted to ask you why."

"Why what?" Lars asked slowly and, by the sounds of it, through gritted teeth.

"Supposing your story is true and your information correct, why did you come with this information to me? I am, after all, a friend of the Senator's, and would probably take his side. Or did you hope to gain an inside ally so to speak? Or is there another reason?"

Lars didn't speak for several minutes, mulling over the question. He seemed to have relaxed, and Dooku had little doubt that the being would answer him truthfully.

"I came to you because I did not think the Jedi would believe me," he finally said. "You broke away from the order because you disagreed with them on a fundamental level, from what I understand, so I hoped that you would at least hear me out."

Dooku raised one eyebrow. "What did you think the Jedi would do to you if you went to them?"

Lars scoffed and shook his head. "Besides lock me in the lowest bowels of the Jedi Temple? They would probably have me treated for insanity and they would dismiss my claims completely, believing that they, in all their self-righteousness, could never have missed such an obvious person being the Sith Lord."

Truthfully, Dooku had to admit to himself that Lars wasn't wholly wrong.

"Very well," he said after a moment. "I have one more question, although it could be classified as more of a speculation. The hints and clues I had found previous to your contacting me seemed to be geared specifically towards me. I believe Sidious was targeting me personally. Would you know why that is?"

He could practically feel the other sentience's eyes on him, staring at him incredulously.

"Have you honestly not figured that out?"

Dooku did have some suspicions, but he didn't particularly like to think about them. He'd been hoping Lars could give him another reason, something he'd missed...

"He is looking for an apprentice," the Lars finally said. Dooku managed to hide his wince at the other being's words.

"Then he is looking in the wrong place," Dooku replied stonily. "I may not be a Jedi anymore, but I will not turn to the Dark Side and I will never be a Sith." If the Sith were supposed to take over the universe as he suspected, then they would have to do so without Dooku's help. Depending on how they were to act, he may not hinder them, but he would not outright side with them. Ever.

To his surprise, Lars just laughed mirthlessly.

"Do you find my words amusing?" Dooku asked, somewhat incensed.

"Only in the fact that I said practically those exact words on multiple occasions," the being said sadly. His tone was not confrontational in the slightest, instead having a sort of sad wistfulness. Dooku couldn't help but deflate.

"In the right circumstances, he could probably turn just about anyone," Lars continued with another shake of his head. "If you do end up meeting him as Sidious, well, I hope he doesn't ensnare you as easily as he did me."

Dooku wasn't sure whether to feel defensive at the other being's lack of faith in him or worried at the absolute certainty that Palpatine, as Sidious, would succeed in turning Dooku. It was a sobering (and rather worrying) thought.

"On another note, I don't think we will be able to meet on a regular basis," Lars said, leaning back on his crate, "but I believe I would like to try and meet fairly often. I have to admit, I do not often get the opportunity for a good debate and you seem to like taking the stance of the devil's advocate."

Ah, so Lars knew that half of what Dooku had brought up had been to simply draw out an opinion from the former Sith. Still, the Count saw the invitation for what it really was: A chance to disillusion Dooku to the Dark Side even more than he already was. Lars was worried he would fall. He felt a flame of annoyance at that, but after a moment's debate, decided to push such useless feelings aside and take the offer. If nothing else, it would make his life here on Courscant more interesting.

"Very well," he said with a nod and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he spoke. He had every intention of squeezing as much information out of Lars as he possibly could, and this was a golden opportunity. Force, Lars was practically *inviting* him to ask about his background, but he figured he would start with something a little more straight forward. "Why do you think all evidence of the Sith should be destroyed? After all, any sentient who does not know their own history is doomed to repeat it."

They debated about many different subjects for the next hour, at which time Lars informed Dooku that he needed to leave. They set up a holoweb site and a basic code that would allow them to contact the other if necessary. They then set up a restaurant where Dooku would meet whichever messenger Lars would send and parted ways.

Dooku found a turbo lift to take him to a higher floor where he could catch an air taxi as he was more than ready to go back to his hotel room and sleep. He didn't see Lars slip back into the maintenance area. If he would have and if he would have followed him, he may have seen him take off his mechanical limbs, stuff them in a bag and

enter the ventilation system with an annoyed mutter.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Many, MANY people have said that Dooku's first name is 'Yan', but I have yet to be able to substantiate the claim in any book or published canon OR legends. As such, Dooku will continue to be simply 'Dooku' or 'Count Dooku'. It will be his whole name, similar to Yoda or (more appropriately) 'Queen Elizabeth' (okay, her last name is Windsor, but still...).

Oh, and I got a note from a rather dedicated reader that they were reading this story without knowing that it is indeed a sequel to my other story 'Hindsight is not Perfect'. This tends to make a LOT more sense if you've read that one first. It's only 11 chapters and a short epilogue, so if you haven't read it, you may want to. ^^;

I also want to point out that most ventilation systems really AREN'T big enough for people to crawl through. However, on Courscant they have extremely large, exuberant buildings that have been in circulation for decades if not centuries. For people to get the ventilation necessary for even somewhat comfortable living, I can't see the systems having main tubes that Anakin could crawl through at his current size fairly easily.

Next chapter comes back to Master Xio's session with Anakin as well as some more interaction with the kids...but the chapter after that will initiate the plot picking up a bit. Funny, but as I've been writing this I've just noticed that I tend to write so my flow of time goes a little slowly because I love the psychology behind everything. I was able to do that a little with 'Hindsight', but no where nearly this much. *shrug* I don't think that's going to really change any time soon, but I will let you know that I already have a great deal of Anakin's major confrontation with Palpatine all planned out, and it will be worth it to stick around if you feel this is dragging a bit. Well, I hope it will. I'M looking forward to it in any case. ;)

Let me know what you think, good, bad or otherwise! :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Perhaps, Anakin thought to himself as he entered the initiate's dining room and abruptly stiffened, *I should have insisted on postponing my 'session' with Master Xio to tomorrow.* He didn't regret asking for a postponement (he'd needed to have a clear head when talking with Dooku and coming down from another session like his last one with the Jedi Mind-healer would not have allowed for that), but he'd only asked for an extra day. It wouldn't have been difficult to ask for two.

He mentally kicked himself. Having to deal with her session today of all days would make a situation already promising to be unpleasant far worse. Then again, his reason for standing stock still in the middle of the dining area was probably the reason she had actually agreed to allow him to wait a day instead of insisting he adhere to their previously agreed upon agenda.

He'd forgotten that the initiate clan schedules would change today; that the Thranta Clan (his own) would share their free time with two different clans than they had previously, and that one of those was the Squall Clan. And surly enough, across the room and directly next to the table his group of initiates had claimed, sat his former best friend, Tru Veld right next to one Darra Thel-Tanis. They were laughing and speaking with each other and several other initiates sitting at their table and they hadn't seen him yet, but there was no way he'd be able to slip past the group without drawing their attention somehow.

Of course, he couldn't help but think. He scanned the room quickly, looking for any more unpleasant surprises, and his eyes stopped on the only person that could possibly make his day even more awkward. The older boy sat by himself at a corner table, quietly chewing his food and exuding an air of nonchalance. Ferus Olin, his former (future?) rival.

Ferus, Darra and Tru would all eventually be chosen as Padawans and Anakin had gone on several joint missions with them during his own Jedi Apprenticeship. He'd never really gotten along with Ferus (now he realized that it had to do with an inferiority complex that he simply wouldn't give into this time around) while he and Tru had become very good friends...until Anakin's recklessness had gotten their

fellow Padawan, Darra, killed. Ferus had dropped out of the order due to his guilt over the situation and Tru had never spoken more than a few words to Anakin again. Truthfully, this time around, he'd been hoping to avoid all of them.

So much for that, he thought with a soft snort. He didn't remember what the name of the third clan was, but he figured it would be his luck that the other boy, one he still held a great deal of resentment towards, would be in it. He remembered that Tru and Darra had both been practically in awe of Olin in their younger years, so they would've had to have some memorable interaction with him within a few years of their being taken as Padawans, so he really should have expected something like this.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a glint of blue and turned to see Hik'te waving at him wildly with more of that exuberant energy he somehow had in spades. And right on cue, everyone else in his initiate group turned to look at him, smile and wave him over. Their actions caught the attention of the tables surrounding them, causing them to look which would in turn...yes, there they went. He saw Tru's eyes light up in recognition and he waved at Anakin too, albeit in a far calmer manner than the Kark'oildeen.

Anakin forced a smile onto his face but couldn't seem to move from his position in the middle of the aisle between tables, unsure of what to do. He really didn't want to have to deal with Tru and Darra today. He never wanted to deal with Ferus again. He'd had dealings with that one as both Anakin and Vader...and he really wasn't sure he could handle the memories (almost all negative in some way) associated with him.

Anakin began to tell himself to buck up and just get it over with, forcing his legs to move him forward and past the smaller tables where the younger children sat. Older Knights and Padawans sat at each end of the miniature tables, helping the Jedi children with their meals or whatever else they needed. Anakin almost wished someone older would sit at their table and keep the older kids in line too; make them stay at their respective tables and not cause a fuss of sorts. Then maybe he wouldn't have to—

A flash of color off to the side suddenly caught his attention, mainly because it corresponded with a Force-signature he knew. It was young and rough, barely there amidst the others (no wonder he hadn't sensed it before), but he knew it none the less. Turning his head so quickly he almost gave himself whiplash, he searched the tables of younglings

and, surely enough, found the one he was looking for.

"Snips," he whispered when he saw her pale, red skin along with the tiny, black and white bumps on the top of her head that would one day become montrals, giving her the echo-location based sixth sense that her species was known for.

Nervous and perhaps unsure, but not shy (never shy), she looked so out of place among the other calm, collected younglings. How long had she been at the temple by this point? A month? Maybe two? He remembered from his original timeline that she had come to the Temple not long after he himself had. And what was more, he still felt something there with her too...the remnants of a bond not yet forged because her grasp of the Force was so rudimentary at this point.

He also remembered the surroundings of a crumbling temple, black with streaks of red shining throughout it, powered by the dark side. He remembered at first her grief and hurt. She'd been far easier to defeat like that. But then...

"*I won't leave you. Not again!"* And she hadn't. That time he'd left her. She hadn't fought with anger then. Perhaps she hadn't claimed to be a Jedi anymore, but in that moment, she had been everything a Jedi stood for. Honestly, if it hadn't been for her fighting with him that day instead of running, he may not have even listened to Luke...not like he'd needed to. She'd been the one to show him that his new view on the world wasn't absolute. She'd been the one to open the door, even if it had cost her her life.

Almost as if sensing his thoughts, she looked up and her large, blue eyes met his. He couldn't help but just stare while she seemed to have forgotten the food in front of her and returned his gaze with equal intensity.

"Whatcha stairin' at?"

The fact that he'd become so distracted that an initiate could sneak up on him was a testament to his frazzled state of mind.

His instincts screamed at him *unknown, close, danger* and he moved before he'd even realized. Half of him expected a lightsaber to the gut and he weaved out of the most likely path a weapon would take. Between all of the training sessions Sidious had put him through—the clones or bounty hunters he'd been forced to fight and kill (half of them not Force sensitive, the other half completely crazy)—his encounters with the rebels and the skills he'd honed during the Clone

Wars, well, he'd learned to roll with the punches. The poor initiate learned the hard way to never sneak up on Anakin, who dropped his food tray as he reached over to grab the person who had spoken in his ear.

Almost immediately he had a semi-firm hold and he turned just right, levering the being over his shoulder and throwing him on the ground as he reached down to his belt for his lightsaber to finish the job, only to realize his weapon wasn't where it should be.

Then he saw the face of the person he'd just thrown onto what was left of his tray of food. It wasn't an attack droid, or a bounty hunter, or the clone of a Sith or one of the Emperor's hands...it was just Hik'te. He stared up at Anakin with an expression he was all to familiar with—a sort of shocked pain, the latter undoubtedly due to the fact that he had landed on his back on top of several dishes.

Anakin blinked down at him in confusion for a few seconds, not quite aware of his surroundings as he tried to piece together what had just happened.

"Ow, ow ow ow ow ow," Hik'te groaned and rolled off of the tray, food sticking to his tense, arched back. The fact that he didn't immediately jump to his feet, which would have forced Anakin to react again, may have saved his life and it snapped Anakin back to reality. Unable to hide his own surprise, he realized what head just taken place. He'd let his guard down. Completely. In the midst of a crowd of Jedi younglings that now all stared silently at the spectacle he'd instigated. Anakin hadn't let his guard down in front of other people for years. What had taken his complete attention so thoroughly...?

Oh, right, Ahsoka. He glanced back at the little girl only to find her staring at him still...along with the rest of the table of younglings and the Jedi babysitters, one of whom had gotten up and was striding over to reprimand them from the look on his face.

Anakin looked back down at Hik'te, who was still moaning on the floor, but the fact that he was moving was definitely a positive thing. If he been unlucky when landing on top of those dishes, he could have injured his spine severely. It bothered Anakin that he could revert to such a state of mind even now. How long had it been since he'd given up the dark side? More than half a year. He'd been at the Jedi temple for more than six months and he still had stupid habits coming back to haunt him.

"Hik'te," Anakin said, reaching down to help him up. "I did not... You have my...apologies. Please do not ever attempt to do that again."

"What was that?" Hik'te asked. He didn't seem too angry, but he was confused, hurting and obviously upset.

"I...let my guard down. It won't happen again. Allow me to help you."

Hik'te blinked at him as Anakin helped him to his feet. "You let your guard down?"

"What happened here?" the older Jedi came over and asked sternly.

Anakin sighed. "My friend here startled me. I...come from a planet where such occurrences can be fatal. I did not mean to hurt him. Please allow me to take him to the healer's wing."

The Jedi frowned at them for a few seconds, but he must have ultimately decided in Anakin's favor as he nodded at the two boys. "Don't let it happen again. I will be taking this up with your supervisor."

Anakin nodded in affirmation (although he didn't particularly care) and went to help Hik'te towards the door of the cafeteria. Jedi initiates usually had a few adults they could come to if they needed to (which wasn't often with the discipline metaphorically pounded into their brains from their first day at the Temple) and who oversaw their classes and schedules. They in turn answered to the smaller Initiate Council who answered to the Jedi Council, and served on an assigned, rotational basis that changed when the class schedules did. As such, Anakin had (probably) never met his current supervisor.

"Did I really just sneak up on you? I mean, you didn't know I was there?" Hik'te asked as they slowly left the dining area and entered the relative quiet of the hall outside.

Anakin did not like admitting it, but with Girth's statement on honesty in mind, he did so none the less. "Yes. As I said, it will not happen again."

To his surprise, Hik'te laughed. "You're really not used to apologizing, are you."

Another hesitation fell before Anakin spoke. "No."

"I didn't know anyone *could* sneak up on you, you know. What had

you so transfixed?"

Anakin looked at his fellow initiate out of the corner of his eye. The boy was looking up at him intently from his hunched position, although Anakin could still see pain in his eyes. Either he was tolerating it well, or he had already released a good deal of it to the Force. Probably a little of both.

"One of the crechlings looked like a child I used to know. Seeing her...surprised me."

"That's it?" Hik'te laughed again. "A little girl did that to you? Not sure what to think about that..."

"No," Anakin rolled his eyes. "I let my own guard down. She did not 'do' anything to me other than surprise me." And he didn't like saying that.

The blue-skinned boy seemed to regard Anakin for a few more seconds before he chuckled again and shook his head. "This is the real you, isn't it."

Anakin stiffened despite himself.

"I do not know what you mean."

"It's just...how you're talking and...stuff. This is how you really are, but you hide it from us. It's nice to finally meet you."

He couldn't help but feel a little uneasy, but he still wasn't sure what the boy was talking about.

"Your meaning still escapes me."

Hik'te frowned again, obviously having a difficult time explaining himself. "When you usually talk to us, it's...awkward, I guess. Like you're trying to dumb it down for all of us or like you're rethinking every word you say a hundred times before you say it. It's like you're pretending to not be you. You're not doing that now." He stopped for a moment, wincing at the pain in his back before he went on. "It's 'cause I startled you, isn't it. I didn't mean to."

Anakin couldn't help but blink in stupor as he stared down at his companion. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and then opened it again only to have no sound come out. Just as he finally thought he might be able to say something, other voices distracted him.

"Anakin! Hik'te!" They both turned to see Coira, Thoran and Hale hurrying after them. He briefly wondered where Maelee was but dismissed the thought when he realized she'd probably already gone ahead to class.

"What happened?" Coira asked breathlessly as she hurried up to them as she worriedly ran a hand through her short, blond hair. "What was that all about?"

Anakin sighed and began to explain again, this time making sure he had his normal, childish facade in place. He didn't glance at Hik'te until they reached the healer's wing, not wanting to know what he would see in the other boy's eyes.

xXx

"So, Anakin, I hear you had a bit of an incident today?" Master Xio asked from her relaxed position in the comfortable chair she had chosen. Anakin sat stiffly in his, not wanting to meet the Jedi Master's gaze but not wanting to seem subservient or ashamed either. He should have known she'd bring it up after making small talk for a good twenty minutes.

"I did."

"Would you like to explain what happened?"

No. But he would anyway. Being difficult would bring more scrutiny and problems than it was worth. "I became distracted and an acquaintance of mine walked behind me without my knowledge."

"So he startled you."

"Yes."

Master Xio's brow furrowed ever so slightly. "So why did you react by throwing him over your shoulder? And I know you used a few evasive maneuvers first, almost as if you were expecting him to hit you. Did you?"

"Yes," Anakin replied. He hadn't expected Hik'te to hit him, per se, but he had expected an enemy...and it still severely irked him that he'd lost sight of reality to that extent. Master Xio raised an eyebrow pointedly, obviously waiting for him to answer her previous question as well, but the former Sith found resisting her gaze little more than child's play.

"I've spoken with Initiate Hik'te a few times and I saw the holo-recordings. He didn't try to attack you from what I could see. Did he threaten you? Is that how he startled you?"

"No," Anakin answered, and not wanting his fellow initiate to be unduly punished or reprimanded, he added: "He simply asked what I was looking at."

The mind-healer nodded grimly. "Anakin, why did you react like that?" the Jedi Master asked again. "I thought Initiate Hik'te was your friend. Why would you do that to him?"

Anakin felt his mouth thinning, and he did not want to answer—again, it came down to the fact that he just didn't trust her. He wasn't sure if it was because she had unhinged him so thoroughly last time, or if it was because she was a Jedi Master (who, in his experience, were not to be trusted) or some strange combination of the two.

"Anakin," she said when he didn't answer. "Please tell me. I promise I won't speak of it to anyone if you don't want me to. Not even the Council."

Liar, Anakin thought. She'd go running to the Council if he scared her enough. And he *could* scare her...so easily.

"I can't help you if you don't let me. Please, give me a chance?"

He didn't want to. He didn't want to try and trust the Jedi again. They had let him down far too many times and he wasn't sure that could ever be mended.

But what would happen if he simply kept quiet? Well, he could guess pretty well. They would probably think he was reverting to his dark side training...and the biggest problem was the fact that they weren't wholly wrong. It could end up with him being dismissed from the Temple if they thought he was enough of a danger. Far more likely was that they could discourage the other initiates from spending time with him...they might do so anyway, but he might be able to do some damage control if he just explained himself, no matter how much the idea did not appeal to him.

Truthfully, he couldn't let her, and by proxy the rest of the Jedi, come to the wrong conclusion about him. He didn't want them to start encouraging what few allies he'd made to avoid him. He *needed* those allies—people he could trust to watch his back...

'*Why*?' a rebellious voice in the back of his mind asked, not for the first time. He could do this all on his own, couldn't he? He was the *Chosen One* after all and he just needed to get strong enough...but hadn't that been his downfall last time? Hadn't that been why Padmé had died and why he'd turned to the dark side and basically destroyed his own life? Because he'd thought he could handle all of the problems that had cropped up when the truth had only been the opposite? Because he really *couldn't* do everything on his own, Chosen One or not?

He needed people to trust him for the simple fact that he *knew* he wasn't strong enough to take out Palpatine yet. He was growing at a rate that had the other Jedi turning their heads, and he felt he could now take on a Senior Padawan and win, but that was a far cry from the level of a Master Sith Lord. If he could get past his mental block and immerse himself in the Force more completely then perhaps he could be even stronger still. He remembered having the abilities to fight Jedi Masters and win. He had the knowledge and skills in his head, it was really just a matter of conditioning his body to be able to do it. Still, he wasn't at the level he needed to be *now* and Palpatine could figure out that Anakin Skywalker used to be Darth Vader any time now.

Yes, even if they were only initiates, he needed to keep his allies. Even just having someone at the Temple who would notice he had gone missing was a good idea. Having them around so he could push them to be better had helped him to push himself as well, much to his surprise. Besides, as annoying as they could be, he still enjoyed their company at times.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had grown attached again, and it filled his stomach simultaneously with both dread and relief. Dread because he and attachments had never really worked out; relief because he still *could* make attachments (between the Emperor and the Jedi, he'd thought that ability had been lost to him). Somehow he thought that Luke had had something to do with that. Still, either way, he found himself surprised that the initiates actually *meant* something to him. No, his current attachments weren't that strong, but they were there.

And he didn't want to lose them to simple, untrue rumors.

Master Xio seemed to realize that Anakin was having an internal debate because she had remained silent the entire time, watching him with a worried intensity that unnerved him.

Still, he decided he would answer and at least give a token effort.

"I...did not realize it was Hik'te," he said slowly.

Her lips pursed. "Who did you think it was?"

He grit his teeth, but opened his mouth to speak again. Even if it wasn't a direct answer to her question, he knew she'd get the subtext. "The last time I...let my guard down like that, it did not end well. Such distraction was an...inclination I have had to overcome."

Her eyes cleared in realization. "So it was an ingrained habit, from your previous training?"

"Yes," he replied, relieved that he hadn't needed to explain it further.

She nodded and sat back. "You know, from what I saw on the security holo, those were very good reflexes. It didn't look like simple training to me, though. Your movements were too visceral. Did your previous masters put you into the field, so to speak? Into real situations?" She asked, disapproval lacing her voice.

"Yes," he answered again. Well, Sidious had.

"Well," she said slowly, "I'm glad you have the reflexes to keep you alive, but I want you to know that you're safe here in the Temple. You don't need those reflexes anymore and hopefully they won't be necessary for a while yet."

There were so many problems with that statement he almost had a hard time keeping track of all of them. He was most definitely *not* safe and he never would be. Not while Sidious lived. And even now, on this second chance at life, he needed those reflexes on a regular basis. Already they had saved him many times since he'd come to Courscant. Not that she would understand that, but still. And the Temple? Safe? When he could break out of an into it with barely a thought? Or when a large enough force could come in and... He forced his mind away from that thought and focused on responding to her.

"I don't believe I can simply be rid of them, but such an incident will not happen again as long as I do not allow myself to become so distracted," he replied truthfully. He could tell it wasn't the answer she was looking for, but it was all she would be getting. She was lucky he'd consented to speak to her at all, Council or not.

"What had you so distracted?" she asked, her voice lighter than it had

been before.

He decided to give her the answer he'd given Hik'te earlier. "I saw a youngling I thought I knew."

"From Tatooine?"

He shrugged.

"Which youngling?"

"The togruta girl." They'd probably know that if they'd seen the security holos anyway so he saw little point in hiding that fact.

Master Xio paused for several seconds before sitting forward again, looking at him intently (did she ever not look that way, he vaguely wondered).

"Anakin, I can tell from your answers that you still don't trust us. The Jedi, I mean. Understandable as that is, may I ask why? I have my suspicions, but I would like to hear it from you, if you feel you can." Her voice was soft, pleading, and he could tell she wouldn't simply drop the subject. Even if she let it go today, she would bring it up later. Besides, she already had hints of his darker history...and truthfully, she deserved to know why he couldn't bring himself to truly open up to her. It wasn't exactly her fault after all. Well, not specifically.

"Why should I trust Force users?" he asked bitterly, his voice low. Involuntarily, his fists clenched in front of him (curse these non-mechanical limbs that he was finding so difficult to control). "All they have ever done is ruin my life. Light or Dark, it doesn't matter." And yet he still cared for the initiates (really, he needed to examine just how that had happened), he still cared for Obi-wan and Siri and Yoda and Qui-gon and even Tru and Darra. It was a twisted, tainted and nostalgic sort of 'care' for almost anyone but the initiates, but still...

"I thought it would be different if I came here," he heard himself say. "I thought...I could change." And he had, to an extent. But he wasn't sure all of his changes had been good.

"You really don't see it, do you?" Master Xio's soft comment drew him from his musings and he looked up at her.

"Pardon?"

"Oh, Anakin, you've already changed so much. If you were once a servant of the dark, as I believe you were, then you've come leaps and bounds. To a point where it is difficult to comprehend even for me."

"Then why do I still have to fight it?" Anakin asked, jaw clenched. "Why is it that every single day I am tempted to fall back? I haven't changed enough...and I'm not sure I ever will."

"That sounds tiring."

Anakin snorted. "You cannot begin to grasp the difficulty I face daily."

She shook her head, a wry smile on her face. "You're right, I don't think I can. But I'm good at guessing. I don't believe there is a single Jedi who hasn't been tempted by the dark side. I also believe most have brushed it subconsciously at some point in their lives. I, myself, had a few run-ins when I was a young fool who didn't know any better.

"Now, I never embraced it," she quickly added at Anakin's surprised expression. "No, I rejected it as soon as I realized what it was. Most Jedi do the same because it frightens them. Not just the idea of the insanely difficult road back to the light, but the way it so thoroughly changes Jedi and how it simply ensnares the unwary so completely."

Anakin kept silent. His mind wandered briefly back to the conversation with Dooku and the similar words he had spoken himself.

"Now you were trained differently," she said quietly. "But you chose to come back anyway. And what you're missing is the fact that there is still a battle. The darkness hasn't conquered you. No matter how tiring it is, you still fight it. How is that not strength?"

"It's more like desperation," he corrected softly. "Not strength. I simply cannot fall again."

"Why not?"

He glanced up in confusion. Had a Jedi really just asked him that?

"You think I should allow myself to fall to the dark side again?" he asked, unable to hide his disbelieving shock.

"No," she said simply. "I just want to know why you don't want to."

He blinked at her for a moment, unsure of what to make of this development. He didn't know how to answer her question because it should be obvious. Shouldn't it?

She must have sensed his uncertainty because she clarified. "What is the dark side to you, Anakin?"

He wasn't sure he wanted to answer that question, and this had begun to go beyond a simple 'token' effort. He'd much prefer to be speaking to Girth right about now, but...Girth couldn't possibly understand this. No non-sensitive could. Even now he wasn't sure he could put his thoughts into words well enough for a trained Force user to understand, let alone a non-sensitive.

Besides, he wasn't completely sure of the answer himself and now that he realized that, he wanted to know. What was the dark side to him? Easy power and strength? Yes, but so twisted and addictive. He wasn't himself when he drew on the dark side. He'd changed so much; his goals, his ideals, his morals...they weren't his anymore. Or were they? Had the dark side simply given voice to his true self? That was what Palpatine had said...and he saw the truth in those twisted words, but...then why did it feel so wrong now? Why did he think so differently when drawing on the darkness?

"It's a trap," he said finally. "Fast power and strength to anyone willing to pay the price."

"And what is the price, Anakin?" Master Xio asked. He was surprised she still didn't sound accusatory.

He was even more surprised when he answered.

"Everything," he said with a shrug although his answer had been far from nonchalant. His movements suddenly seemed weighted and tired again. "The dark side changes everything a person is. They still have their memories, but their past becomes unimportant. All they strive for is more power—for any reason—because that becomes their entire focal point. I find it Ironic, as the reason one turns to the dark side means nothing afterword."

And when had he decided to actually give open, honest answers to her? Or was he answering himself? He'd lost track somewhere along the way.

"So that is why it is so difficult for people to come back," the Jedi Master said, sounding as if she'd just had a revelation of sorts. He

supposed she had.

"Yes," Anakin answered.

"If you don't mind me asking," she said carefully, "what brought you back?"

He thought about that for a moment, wondering how he should answer that. She wouldn't understand no matter what he said, but this, at least, he could put it into context

"Any reason to return to the light has to be stronger than the dark side itself, more powerful in a way. That is why it is almost impossible to come back. For me, it was family."

"Your mother?"

Anakin felt a small smile tug at his lips. "And other people I cared for."

"This is nothing short of enlightening," Master Xio said after a long pause, almost as if in a daze. Then her gaze focused back on Anakin, her expression thoughtful but not intense for once. "When you get older, I recommend you consider making a holocron. The information that you have could save people and it should be passed on."

Anakin blinked in surprise. Where had *that* come from? "A...holocron?" How could information about his fall to the dark side help anyone else? Well, perhaps his return to the light could...but still, a holocron? Besides, if he had information to put into a holocron, shouldn't he just update the Great Holocron that was the central information hub for the Jedi Library?

"Forgive me for side-tracking you," Master Xio said with a wave of her hand. "That is something to consider at a much later date. For now, I have to ask how you've come to terms with this?"

Anakin frowned. "Come to terms with what?"

"Your fall to the dark side. You speak of it fairly easily. I can tell it still causes you a great deal of pain, but the fact that you can talk about it as you do suggests you have come to accept it."

Anakin's frown deepened. "I don't..." he stopped, struggling to put his thoughts into words again. "It is something that happened to me because of my decisions and...something that I believe I will always carry with me, no matter how I wish otherwise."

"That is a mature outlook," Master Xio said. "Very impressive."

"I don't know if I can agree with that, but the thought is appreciated."

She seemed to think for a few minutes as she looked at him before standing gracefully. "Well, I believe that is enough for today. Thank you for speaking with me, Anakin. Are you ready to start your session with D-40?"

Not particularly, but at least he didn't want to bolt like he'd wanted to last time.

"Yes," he said as he too rose to his feet.

"Then I will see you in an hour."

"Yes, Master," he said with a bow before turning and walking into the room where D-40 sat plugged into a corner. He had some new ideas for the wiring and he'd even been able to sneak in a few parts this time...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always to Batfan7! You guys really don't know how much she does. ^^;

Also, revamped to include season 2 of Rebels.

AHSOKA! NOOOOOOOOO!

EZRA! NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

KANEN! NOOOOO!

ANAKIN! You *censored for content*. NOOOOO!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin stared at the holoprojector channel with a completely blank face that did, if he said so himself, a fabulous job of hiding the roiling emotions he truly felt. Now he had confirmation that he had truly only postponed the inevitable.

The news anchor woman—a Twi'lek of course—on the screen smiled happily. Anakin couldn't figure out why. She should be devastated. People were celebrating and all he wanted to do was throw up.

Across the top of the viewing area read the words 'Election Day Results' and just below that, the name of the newly elected chancellor, one Senator Sheev Palpatine.

After a minute, Anakin walked out of the room, unable to hear any more lies about that man, and how good this would be for the Republic and the universe at large, without snapping and heading over to the Senate building and attempt to kill his former Master immediately, Dark Side or not.

xXx

Obi-wan Kenobi wondered how he always managed to get into positions like this. He hunkered down beneath a boulder and deflected what shots accidentally strayed towards him. Fortunately they weren't shooting at him this time, although he had no doubt he would attract his share of blaster bolts if he revealed his position. He was sure a few people had seen his lightsaber already, but, thankfully, they hadn't focused on him.

He thought back on the mission and wondered how it had gone down hill so quickly. It had been another simple protection mission. He was supposed to safely deliver the senator of a mid-rim world called Haardian to a peace treaty and then return him to Courscant safely, but once they had reached the supposedly secure summit, they had been attacked. That wouldn't have been too out of the ordinary or difficult to handle if the senator, who had acted rather coldly towards Obi-wan since the moment they met, had pulled out a com unit and yelled into it something about attacking. The Knight couldn't

remember exactly what the man had said as Obi-wan had been a bit distracted at the time.

The distraction, as it turned out, had been several ships sporting the Haardian symbol, flying in (which broke the conditions of the treaty, among other things) and releasing troops that had obviously come to fight for the senator. Obi-wan had managed to deflect enough fire to allow his charge to retreat to safety inside the building, but when the Jedi had gone to follow, the man had locked him out. To make matters worse, the top floors of the building had exploded not long after that, raining debris down around Obi-wan and the fighting factions.

Obi-wan had managed to avoid the randomly falling objects, but more men from each side just kept appearing, surrounding the area and blocking any exit he had. When the dust had settled, he'd managed to find cover between two large hunks of rock that the now ruined building had been made from.

Frankly, he had no idea how to get out of this one. Technically, he'd failed at his mission and now it looked as if he would have a hard time making it out alive himself. There was a small chance the situation could be salvaged, but only if he could somehow get back to and inside of the building. If he managed that, he could search for the senator (who may or may not still be alive). Obi-wan could feel people inside the building still, but it was a matter of getting there.

Unfortunately, only one option seemed open to him, but charging out into the crossfire like that was suicide. Still, he couldn't just sit there and wait for a lucky shot to get him either.

It looked like he didn't have much of a choice. Setting his sights on the building, he breathed deeply and released everything to the Force once...

Something was wrong. The Force warned him that he would undoubtedly be shot if he ran into that storm of red and green bolts.

...twice...

But he had come here knowing something like that could happen. He knew that every time he received a mission and he had long ago accepted it.

He went to breathe a third breath, after which he would rush out, when words flowed through his mind, almost as if someone had

spoken them to him aloud, although he was sure he couldn't have physically heard them.

'There are...many people here who would find your death as difficult as you are finding your Master's. '

Obi-wan paused, then he looked out into the laser storm again. Suddenly, it really didn't seem like a good idea. No, there had to be another way. He simply hadn't looked hard enough. So what could he do to avoid notice from all the troops? Or to avoid all the blaster bolts? He could move the chunks of rock he currently hid behind with the Force and use them as shields. It would take a lot of effort, but he could do it. Still, it would take a great deal of his concentration, and it would leave his front and back open. He could angle the rocks, but it still wouldn't give him complete protection with their sizes.

A distraction. That's what he needed. If he could distract both sides, he could simply run to the door without having to use the crumbling chunks of wall as shields at all. What would draw everyone's attention? He looked around, studying the shape of the land and looking for anything that could help him...

Like a giant boulder on a nearby cliff. That would be even harder than the rock-shields to move, but it would definitely cause a distraction, and it was far enough away that it should give the people below time to get out of the boulder's path.

Calming his mind, he reached out with the Force and pulled at the large rock. It was bigger than he had anticipated, and its balance wasn't nearly as precarious as it looked, but he was determined not to die here...and to avoid getting seriously hurt if at all possible.

Gritting his teeth, he reached deeper into the Force, allowing the sounds of the battle fade around him. It was a dangerous place to be with the possibility of a stray blaster bolt coming his way, but he needed...that boulder...to...*there!*

Breathing hard, he opened his eyes again, only to watch the blaster storm slow and stop as all attention went to the falling boulder as it split apart and brought a good portion of the brown and red cliff face down with it.

Tired as he was, Obi-wan forced himself to focus his mind towards his goal, determined to get to that building. Again, reaching out with the Force, he broke away from his cover and sprinted with a single-minded purpose towards the building, leaping over the debris in his

way. A few people noticed him and tried to shoot, but he easily deflected those bolts, using his momentum to slash through the door and force-push the section he cut away.

He dove into the darkened interior and relative safety of the building, surprised to find the hallways relatively undamaged. With one last glance over his shoulder, he turned and ran towards the life-signs he could still feel through the Force, hoping that one of them would be his charge.

xXx

As ever a man of action, Anakin had decided that the time had come to instigate one of his plans. He knew he was acting somewhat rashly; that the Chancellor's election had spurred him on, but he saw little harm in moving ahead with this particular plan. He didn't have the back-up funds he'd wanted yet, so he decided he'd just have to be careful and perhaps find another racing circuit.

He stared at the holo-screen of the computer he sat at with a thoughtful frown on his lips. He'd sneaked out of the Temple again and come to one of the local libraries to finish his business. He had on a jacket with a large hood that covered his head, but that was about as far as he dared go when it came to disguises right now. Going some place public like this, even at this time of night, would draw too much attention if he wore anything else. Except a wig. He really needed to purchase one.

He'd pulled up several contact pages in different windows. When he'd first begun to use bounty hunters as Vader, he'd been surprised at how easy they were to contact simply because he had tried to hunt them down as a Jedi multiple times, with varying degrees of success. Most of them had their names on a holoweb page or a message board of sorts. The really good ones didn't need such things, though. A simple web-mail address worked just fine. After that it was a matter of them actually responding to messages (as they would only answer back if the inquiry interested them).

Anakin had worded his missives very carefully, but the possibilities that those he wished to respond would actually do so were still slim at best. Still, he'd never been one to give up easily, so he would keep sending messages until he got a response and that was all there was to it.

It had taken him hours to get everything ready, and he needed to head

back to the Temple soon. Hoping he wasn't acting too soon, he tapped the holographic 'send' button for his final letter and logged out of his web-mail account.

As he waited for the air-taxi to pick him up, he took out his com unit and opened the hologrpahic options (which he'd added personally) and began to do something he hadn't had to do for decades—he started organizing his time. He had too many things on his plate at the moment to do otherwise and had to make sure that no one at the Temple suspected anything about his extracurricular activities. Adding one thing more onto everything would not help this endeavor...but he'd never been able to sit by and do nothing. This wasn't anything huge when it came to Galactic repercussions, but it was *something*, and that helped to calm his mind.

He'd almost reached the Temple (and was trying to decide if he could possibly start 'going to bed' earlier on his B Day schedule without drawing too much attention to himself) when he felt a nudge in the Force.

At first he jumped, startling the rather large woman who had taken a seat beside him. Shooting her an apologetic smile, he relaxed against the seat and closed his eyes, feeling the Force flow around him.

'*Anakin,'* the very familiar voice of Qui-gon said serenely. *'It's time. Get to the healer's wing as soon as you can. '*

'They won't allow me in' he protested silently. *'Seeing as I* should *currently be sleeping in my quarters...'*

He could almost see Qui-gon raise an amused eyebrow. *'Has that ever stopped you before?'*

Anakin scowled. *'No, but I can't exactly use my lightsaber to cut down the door and anyone in my way. '*

A chuckle reverberated through the Force, causing Anakin to scowl harder. *'I'm sure you can find a way. '*

This time Anakin sighed aloud, his face reverting to its normal blank state. *'I am on my way. '*

xXx

Jango Fett finished strapping on his armor in preparation for landing in perhaps half of a galactic standard hour and then went about

arming himself. Then he grabbed his portable com unit and opened the holoweb to check for any last-minute messages, pleased that he had had the insight to install the (rather expensive) hyperspace holoweb connection hardware.

He sorted through his new messages quickly, spotting with an experienced eye the jobs that would actually interest him. Just as he was about to close his web-mail, a note popped up notifying him that a new message had been received.

Noting that he still had time, he accepted that he would indeed have a few minute to look the note over and clicked on it. He scanned the missive quickly...then paused and went back to reread it again. What...the...kriff?

Whoever this 'Luke Lars' was he certainly had Jango's attention...and perhaps not necessarily in a good way. No one should know that much about him, even if all he found in the inquiry were vague hints, he was too good at reading between the lines to not get the hints in the writing.

Deciding he would have to look the message over later, he flagged it and then closed the com. After all, he had a job to do...one that would take care of his entire future and retirement if he could pull it off, and he would pull it off. His pride as a Mandalorian wouldn't allow for anything else.

xXx

Anakin was used to sneaking through the Temple at night. It wasn't too difficult of a task if one hid their presence and otherwise kept themselves open to the Force (something only a Senior Padawan should know how to do). The problem was, he had more experience breaking *out* of the healers wing than he did breaking *into* it.

Once he reached the Temple again, he glanced up at it with a frown. The healer's wing started on a fairly high floor and it would take time to get there, but it would be far easier to break in from the outside if only because there wouldn't be healers and patrols to watch out for and he could take as much time as he needed.

Still, it really was so far up there...

Sighing, Anakin gathered the Force and ran at the building. He'd climbed the outside of the Temple before, no where nearly as often as sneaking around inside, but often enough that it only took him 40

minutes to reach the correct floor. It took him another ten minutes to find the right window. It had an electronic lock and a nearly sheer drop for several stories from the four inch ledge, but it wasn't anything Anakin couldn't handle.

With judicious use of the Force and the small pack of tools he'd taken to carrying around with him, he managed to pick the lock and slipped silently into the room. Fortunately it was never really dark on Coruscant. The lights of the cities and the fact that they were so near the deep core ensured that some light always made it through the atmosphere. He didn't need it, but the dim light illuminated the sleeping form on the bed, giving her pale skin a ghostly glow that unnerved him.

Pushing his unease aside, he approached the bed and...stood there. What was he supposed to do now? Struggling to keep his face blank, he closed his eyes and sank into the Force.

'*Ah, Anakin. '*

'Master Qui-gon. ' Anakin greeted.

'There is little to be worried about, Anakin,' Qui-gon assured. *'I simply need you to keep yourself as immersed in the Force as possible while touching Jedi Tachi's forehead. The Force and I will guide you further. '*

'Yes, Master,' Anakin acknowledged. The reassurance didn't help a great deal, but he would take what he could get at this point.

He somehow *felt* Qui-gon shake his head, but the man didn't say anything. Reaching out to the Force, he proceeded to wrap it around him and raised his hand, letting it rest on the older woman's head. He still couldn't seem to reach any more deeply, but the Force had always been apart of him. It was a strange conundrum, and he compensated the lack of depth by simply drawing on more.

After a moment, he felt a presence reach out and touch his. It felt like the gentle hand of a warm breeze on a Naboo spring day; welcoming and full of faith while simultaneously standing as firm as a mountain.

'*Master Qui-gon?'* he asked tentatively.

'Follow me' the presence answered by taking hold of the spiritual equivalent of Anakin's hand. It was definitely Qui-gon.

'Yes, Master,' Anakin said, focusing on following the presence to where

it led, refusing to let go but not feeling the necessity to clutch tightly. The calming presence of Qui-gon Jinn radiated confidence in both himself and in Anakin and didn't seem to second guess himself at all. His self assurance comforted Anakin and he found himself relaxing as the man led them deeper into the Force.

They could have wondered in the calming swirls and ebbs that was the Ashla for hours or for days or moments, Anakin wasn't sure which, and he didn't particularly care. It had been years—decades—since he'd been able to immerse himself this fully and completely. He simply reveled in the peace and calm that he hadn't been able to really feel since he'd died.

Which was a strange thought, but didn't seem out of place to him at all for some reason.

'Because it is true,' Qui-gon said, obviously having heard Anakin's thoughts. *'Truth is welcome here as facing truth will always bring you peace eventually. And you are broadcasting rather loudly,'* the Jedi Master said with a soft smile that Anakin could feel somehow.

Anakin wasn't sure if he believed that truth would always bring peace, but he could appreciate the sentiment.

'You are almost as stubborn as Obi-wan. '

Anakin's answering expression could have sucked water from the air. To his surprise, Qui-gon laughed...actually laughed. It wasn't a deep, hearty chuckle, but it shot through the Force in pleased waves and Anakin could feel the sincere approval and happiness behind it.

'You and I will have to have some discussions about my former Padawan. I believe there are some stories you need to hear, and I would like to hear your own in return. '

'Maybe,' Anakin answered noncommittally.

'I think you will enjoy the stories I have. I will say that many of them are a bit embarrassing. '

Despite himself, Anakin felt his interest spark. He was about to ask Qui-gon exactly when he was planning on visiting with him when he felt the other presence. It was weak, barely there at all, but he felt it none the less.

'Is that Siri?' he asked uneasily.

'Yes' Qui-gon stated soberly, then he stopped. *'Anakin, I don't know what will happen. She could get all of her memories from your timeline, or she could get none of them. In the worst case scenario, she will receive and incorporate only a few and not acquire any more. At that point she will be confused at best, terrified at worst. '*

Anakin frowned. *'Then are you sure it's a good idea that I am there when she awakens? She isn't exactly fond of me at the moment. '*

Qui-gon shook his metaphorical head. *'I cannot reach anyone else to have them attempt this. I believe your own experience with death has made my own efforts to reach you far easier than it would otherwise be. '*

'Oh. ' Anakin responded. He really wasn't sure about this, but if it would save Siri's life...she had been someone he'd looked up to and someone he had wronged, if indirectly, multiple times. But if she woke confused and with even half of her memories from his timeline, she could blurt out all of his secrets. He did not like the sound of that, even if they were dismissed as ramblings and possible futures, it could still prove difficult for him.

'Anakin,' Qui-gon's voice came quietly to his soul. *'The real difference between the Light Side of the Force and the Dark Side is the focus. I told you once that your focus determines your reality. The Dark focuses only on one's self. '*

Anakin scowled. *'You're manipulating me. '*

Qui-gon didn't answer.

'But you're also right,' the former Sith muttered then sighed. Anakin acknowledged the truth of the older Jedi's words by reaching towards the diminished presence and touching it with the Force.

He looked up into the face of a man...Obi-wan..."No ...yours." He let something—a rock? A crytstal?—fall into Obi-wan's palm."Now I will never leave you."

"You will never leave me," he repeated. Then the blackness swarmed in and...

He smiled down at his new Padawan. Ferus Olin was a bit on the stuck-up side, but something about the boy reminded him...no her *of her own master and...someone else...*

Blaster bolts shot around her as she ran, dancing with her blade and

drawing on the Force. Next to her, the graceful form of her master, Adi Gallia, twirled in synch with her own movements. She wanted nothing more than to be like that one day...

She bit her lip as she cut her hair, watching it fall to the floor. It wasn't so bad until she got to her Padawan braid. Sheering that off felt inherently wrong*...but she had to if she was to go under cover successfully...*

Her head leaned on a shoulder, lips resting against the other's warm skin while her hand traced his. She felt the calluses from lightsaber training and the skin felt firm—not hard, but steady. She liked that feeling, even if it scared her to death. "Siri," he said. She wanted to sound steady and firm when she answered him, but she couldn't. She could only whisper, "I feel it too."

She watched in horror as her friends—her family*—ran and screamed and fought and suffered...and she could only float there while the boy she had always been wary of (but sadly, had usually respected) became a monster by cutting them all down. It went beyond all the horrors she'd ever seen of the war, beyond all imagination...so this was a Sith.*

A hundred thousand other thoughts flew through Anakin's head so quickly that he almost blacked out. It was her life from her point of view—the youngest creshling barely able to stand and walk to long after her death. The thoughts and memories came out of order and almost all at once, and he was sure he'd never be able to go through all of them, even if he wanted to. And he didn't really want to. It felt as if he were trespassing on something that should not ever be completely shared.

And then they were gone, leaving him with only a few recollections.

Anakin's eyes shot open and he jumped away from the bed and Siri, grabbing his head as he fell to his knees. He thought he could hear Qui-gon talking to him, his voice worried and soothing at the same time, but Anakin couldn't make out any words.

Then a high-pitched gasp had him glancing up. He forced himself to focus, throwing off the strange mental and emotional overload along with its affects, handing everything off to the Force as best he could. Siri sat on the bed, hair mussed and eyes wildly searching the room. Anakin saw no recognition there and didn't need the Force to know this would not end well.

"W-where am I? What's going on? Where are the clones? Master Gallia?! Obi-wan! Master Jinn? Wait...he's dead? I'm dead! Aren't I?"

She spoke in a panicked rush that did not fit the image he remembered of Siri Tachi in the slightest.

"Siri!" he hissed, eyes shooting to the door in case anyone had heard them. Then he rushed over and shut it quietly.

"W-wait, who are you? What..." she faded off quickly as Anakin stepped into the light, hands up in what he hoped she would interprete as a soothing manner. "Ana...No! Vader!"

Anakin winced and took a step back, although he didn't put his hands down, despite the fact that he felt more like he was surrendering instead of soothing now. With some effort, he pushed the feeling aside.

"Wait, Vader...you can't be Vader. You don't look like him...but you feel like him...kind of...and you do look like him—you're going to try and kill me again!"

"No!" Anakin said firmly. "I am not. Jedi Knight Siri Tachi, get ahold of yourself!"

Hearing her full name and future rank had the desired affect and she shut her mouth with a 'clop'. She blinked at Anakin from her position on the bed, flattened against the wall with her feet in front of her either ready to push her back further (impossible) or kick out in defense (highly likely).

"You are Siri Tachi and I am Anakin Skywalker. The year is 968 RR and right now, you are a Jedi Padawan." She opened her mouth but Anakin cut her off with a sharp gesture. "Ah!" Again she shut her mouth.

Anakin continued. "You are bound to be horribly confused right now because you have received memories from the future. Yes, they really happened, no, they don't have to happen again and yes, I am from the future too. Qui-gon said you might have a mix of memories when you awoke so I will tell you of the events that have and haven't occurred: You have not yet become a Knight. This means you have not gone under cover to take out the slave corporation, you have not taken on a Padawan named Ferus Olin, the Clone Wars have not started, you *have not* died and I have not fallen to the Dark Side."

He paused at that thought for a moment before sighing. "Well, not in this universe. In our previous timeline, Obi-wan sent us back in time to...give me another chance." And at this point he felt so many

conflicting emotions over that fact that he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to sort it out. "In this universe, P...Queen Amidala did not nominate Palpatine for the position of Supreme Chancellor, although he was recently elected. Yes, he is still Darth Sidious and I need you to keep that fact a secret for now."

She just stared at him for several seconds, and when she spoke again her voice wavered uncertainly.

"Why?"

"Because I plan on telling the Council eventually, but I want to make sure they believe me, and right now I'm looking for proof. I'm also trying to keep Count Dooku from becoming Darth Tyrannus because it sets back Palpatine's plans. If the Jedi try to contact him or start pushing him away from Palpatine, I'm afraid it will have the opposite affect." He wasn't normally one for giving out information like that, but he needed to get across the necessity for silence, so he paused and waited for her answer.

Then, quite suddenly and with no previous warning, she deflated, collapsing in a heap on her bed, body shaking. She was *crying* he realized suddenly and began to feel the stirrings of his own panic rise in his chest. Even as Vader he'd had a hard time when a woman cried...really cried, not out of fear of him or physical pain but from sheer emotional overload (as Vader, he usually simply took care of the problem by killing the woman but even if that were a viable solution to his predicament, he would not even consider doing so to Siri right now).

"Th-they died! Everyone died! Y-you killed them," she whispered that last phrase and it cut his soul as deeply as if someone had used a lightsaber on his body.

Clenching his fists, he responded by putting his hands behind his back and assuming a militaristic position. Then he lifted his chin defiantly. "It will not occur again."

"You k-killed Obi-wan!"

He did not like that panic or the anger he heard in her voice again.

"He's alive, Siri," he said firmly. "He's alive and he's come to visit you. I...I think he still loves you."

"NO!" Siri yelled, putting a hand over both ears. "We said we'd never

speak of it again! We can't! I'll end up like you! Or worse...he will..."

Ouch. That hurt. Anakin was not enjoying this. He began to search for a reason to leave as he answered. "I very seriously doubt that." He couldn't help the dryness in his tone of voice.

She took a shuddering breath. "H...he promised. He promised he wouldn't remind me...that we would bury it and forget it..."

And wasn't that *so* utterly *Jedi* of them? And wasn't that part of his problem with the Jedi Order to begin with? Ignoring a feeling and pretending it doesn't exist...the words from his talk with Girth came back to him.

"Ignoring an emotion doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Anakin heard himself say, wondering when this confrontation had taken a turn towards this subject. At least he'd successfully distracted her from her confusion and...well, him.

"Well what are we supposed to do then?!" she asked, almost yelled. Anakin winced and glanced at the closed door, but he knew she wouldn't calm down or quiet down. "Do what you did? Because that turned out so well!"

He had to quash the anger rising within him. "At least we didn't live a lie!"

"You lied to everyone!"

"And you're lying to yourself!" And if the Jedi were living in a constant state of lying and denial, could that possibly be why they had stagnated? Because they, as an organized, sanctioned group and a mini-society all had those same mental blocks in place? It was an interesting thought that he decided to file away and examine later. He turned his attention back to Siri, who knelt on the bed, hunched over and grasping at her chest. She looked to be in pain, but if he had guessed correctly, it was a familiar pain to Anakin and he felt his anger drain away.

"Look, I'm not trying to persuade you to change your decision. I am saying that I've learned that burying your...feelings isn't healthy. And if you can't be honest to yourself, who can you be honest to?"

They sat in silence for several seconds before Siri spoke without looking up.

"That was surprisingly insightful for a Lord of the Sith."

"Former," Anakin said with a sigh. He was surprised that he didn't feel any anger at her accusation, mainly just a resigned acceptance. "I am no Sith anymore." Truthfully, he wasn't sure whether he was trying to persuade her or himself at this point.

She glanced up at him warily and with a wildness that still spoke of her utterly confused state of mind.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his hand, something he'd taken to doing lately (he liked touching his face and not feeling that black mask there). "Siri, I'm trying to change the future. I'm not going to destroy the Jedi Order, I will find a way to take out Palpatine and...I'm going to stay away from Padme too."

She frowned. "But you just...that's a little hypocritical of you, isn't it?"

Well, it was nice to know she hadn't lost her sharp tongue. He returned her expression. "The difference is I am not going to ever deny my love for her. I feel it every day of my life and I will until the day I die. It kills me, but living with this pain is far better than living with the pain of knowing I caused her death. And maybe I'm wrong. Maybe staying away isn't the right thing, but that is my current decision and I'll cross that bridge when I come to it again. I may never have to." Although for some reason he highly doubted that.

She shook her head and put her hands up to her temples, each curled in a fist. "I...I can't think right now! It-it's all so...I just...where is everyone? Anyone?!"

"I'm surprised a healer hasn't come already," Anakin muttered as he walked towards the window. Frowning at his own words, he reached out with the Force and almost seemed to run into a wall. "A shield?" he asked softly, and then smiled. Apparently Qui-gon felt they needed some time to talk.

"I am leaving. A healer and your master should be here once Qui-gon drops his shield—"

"Master Gallia?!" Siri suddenly spoke, so much hope in her voice that he had to look back at her. "S-she's alive?"

Her words drove home just how bad this would be for her. She'd already hinted that she didn't know whether she was alive or dead, and she would remember many deaths and battles and hardships that

had never happened. The other Jedi were not bound to take this well...and it hit him equally as hard that he couldn't really help her. He wasn't even sure if visiting would be a good idea at this point. Maybe he'd drop the hint to her master that she needed to see a mind-healer too. Not that the Jedi mind-healers could help all that much...well, she'd grown up a Jedi, so perhaps they could help her after all.

"Yes," he finally said, answering her question. "And she's probably very worried about you."

Siri didn't say anything and they both sat there in the awkward silence for a few more minutes before Anakin decided that enough was enough.

"Don't tell them yet, about us and everything about the future...please." He turned and hefted himself up and onto the window ledge where he paused one last time.

"And one more thing," he said softly but he knew she could hear. "Obi-wan never broke his promise to you." A Force-assisted jump later had him hanging from some nearby scaffolding. He felt the shield vanish and knew the healers would come to assist her soon.

It took him ten minutes to sneak back into the temple and get to his room, but it took him much longer to get to sleep. His mind kept him awake.

He'd once thought that Obi-wan might love Siri, but he'd dismissed the thought when his former master had acted so calm after her death. If they had truly loved each other...just how much self discipline had Obi-wan possessed at the time? Anakin hadn't thought it possible to have *that* much self control. Then again, he'd never been one for self control. No wonder it boggled his mind.

His respect for his old master rose a few notches. Then his mind wandered unwittingly to Mustafar. He remembered his Master yelling at him, screaming with tears in his eyes and sweat pouring down his face...and if he'd had so much self discipline and seeing Anakin like that had driven him that far...

"*You were my brother, Anakin! I loved you!"*

Thinking about the memories started to really hurt again when the implications began to sink in, and he turned away from the thought. Girth had said he needed to acknowledge his feelings, but he didn't

think he'd ever be able to when it came to those memories. Some things simply hurt too much.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: No, I haven't forgotten the Council's reactions to Girth, but it will come into play later.

Also, someone wrote a note to me that said that Didi's Cafe became Dex's Diner before Obi-wan took Anakin as a padawan. Don't know where you got your information, hon, but I read the Jedi Quest books and according to them, Anakin was in his early teens before Didi left for a mid-rim planet because Astri (his daughter if I remember correctly) married someone (who turned out to be a rather large jerk, actually). I rarely put notes to single people in the notes section but I felt this had to be addressed.

I haven't had a chance to respond to everyone's comments, and from the looks of it, I'm not sure if I will be able to. So I wanted to tell you that I do read every single one of them and I absolutely love hearing feedback from you guys! A lot of people say they don't like leaving long reviews, and I have to ask WHY?! I LOVE long, in-depth reviews. So please don't feel you're too wordy or have written too much in a review. That is almost NEVER the case.

I will say that longer reviews tend to get more feedback from me. ;)

Someone actually threatened to hunt me down and glue my fingers to the keyboard. *snicker* You do realize that it would just make writing more difficult, right? ;)

Anyway, thanks again to everyone who responded/reviewed and please give thanks and kudos to batfan7!

Let me know what you think!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life as Anakin knew it seemed to be far more chalk full of catch 22's than anyone seemed to realize. For instance, the Jedi teachings said that he had to be calm, relaxed and release his emotions to the Force to enter into a trance that could immerse his soul. Immersing one's soul in the Force expanded one's view of the world, helped maintain calm and could bestow knowledge and understanding that simply could not be gained in any other way. However, his inability to enter into deep meditation of any kind without an emotional focal point really only created aggravation, which then had to be released to the Force before he could even hope to succeed, which put him right back at square one.

In short, trying to enter into a meditative trance frustrated him, which in turn blocked his ability to enter into said trance. This maddening circle had existed since he'd come back in time (and probably before that in all honesty) and as far as Anakin could tell, it wasn't about to solve itself.

It didn't help that the first time he'd gone through the learning curve for meditation he'd had a training bond with Obi-wan, which had made the task of learning said meditation *infinitely* easier...and he'd found the process difficult to a point of resentment the first time. Learning to do so the second time around couldn't have conceivably been more difficult...which had made no sense at all to Anakin. He'd gone through all of this once before and had eventually excelled, even if he had disliked and shunned the practice of meditation. He'd always had a connection to the Force that went far deeper than most Jedi could really comprehend and he knew even the advanced theory of both sides of the Force backwards, forwards and sideways.

He'd come to the conclusion (and was still completely convinced) that his problem could be traced back to his habits. He was *used* to the Dark Side and the Sith practices. It was a conundrum as he could reach instantly and easily for the Dark *or* Light sides of the Force during combat or to sense other beings. He had little problem predicting blaster bolts and other random things that would cause him harm and he *always* felt the Force (of course, every Jedi did, but that knowledge only went to show that Anakin really *should* be able to do

this). But he had made almost no progress in nearly seven months.

Another factor came from the fact that Master Kleon couldn't *show* him how to really enter into meditation through a training bond. He could only show the initiates he taught in the most basic sense. He simply didn't have time for more personal instruction (one reason why the Jedi stuck to the 'Master/Padawan' philosophy) and Anakin understood this. That didn't make it any easier. Quite frankly, Anakin wasn't sure he'd be able to stomach many more of his Force Technique classes before he snapped and killed the gran out of sheer aggravation. The knowledge that he probably *would* actually do so if pushed too far did not help his state of mind in the slightest.

So it was with some rather justified worry that he entered the classroom that would hold the dreaded class, trailing reluctantly behind his group of...friends (and wasn't that still an unnerving thought?).

"Anakin!" an excited voice whispered into his ear and he glanced over to see Coira grinning at him as she nodded to the front of the classroom. "Look! It's Master Yoda and Master Yaddle!"

Slightly taken back, Anakin turned to the front of the room where the two diminutive Jedi Masters sat serenely on a pair of chairs that were, in Anakin's opinion, entirely too large for them. He must have been particularly distracted if he hadn't noticed their presences before he'd come into the room. Either that or, more likely, they were using some advanced shielding.

"Yes, I can see that," he said with a nod to Coira.

She blinked at him in mildly stunned confusion before the brightness of realization lit her eyes. "Oh, right, you've never met them before because you're new here. That's why you're not excited, right?"

Anakin didn't answer for a moment, carefully thinking over the past seven months that he'd been back in time. He had, of course, met Yoda, but he didn't recall meeting Yaddle in this lifetime. If he recalled correctly, actually, Master Yaddle's chair had been vacant when he'd gone before the Council earlier in the second timeline. She'd probably been on a mission of some sort at the time.

"Uh, I've met Master Yoda," he said truthfully.

"Oh. Well, you'll love Master Yaddle. She's even cooler than Master Yoda! She's so nice and always gives us treats!" the girl said with a

large, innocent grin. Sometimes Anakin wondered if Coira really was supposed to be in their age group with the way she behaved. Of his...friends (gah! Would he *ever* get used to that?!), she tended to be the most naïve and...well, innocent. She acted more like he would expect a six-year-old Jedi to; either that or a normal ten-year-old. Still, as far as he knew, she did well enough in all of her theory classes and was a rather decent saber fighter for her age. He found it funny, but of all the children his age, he seemed to be able to associate with her the most because she didn't seem to have taken to the Jedi teachings when it came to emotion. She would broadcast all of her thoughts on her face and in her body language almost without any reservation whatsoever.

That didn't mean he knew how to respond to her exuberance.

"Oh," was all he could come up with this time.

The blond girl rolled her gray-green eyes and shook her head in an anticipatory exasperation...and Anakin wasn't sure how she could express both emotions at the same time. The fact that she was a Jedi Initiate to boot kind of overwhelmed his mind.

The other initiates in their clan (and to a lesser extent, in their group) tended to be a little stand-offish towards the girl, like she made them uncomfortable and had something 'wrong' with her. It had become a sore point to Anakin because as far as he was concerned, the girl was perfectly normal. He couldn't understand why this observation bothered him but had come to simply accept that it did.

As such, he normally avoided her too (as he did with most of his classmates), but made a point of trying to include her when they did things together as a group and he sat by her in class as often as he could, going so far as to ask other initiates to move so he could have the seat next to her.

"Just wait," Coira grinned and grabbed his arm, dragging him down a row of seats set out for the children. "You'll love them! I know you will!"

She took a seat by Hik'te, plopping down and shooting her rather bright grin at the blue-skinned boy as well. Anakin sat beside her in a far more dignified manner, turning his attention to the two similar Masters at the front of the class. They both looked around the room with the same unhurried movements that exuded both confidence and peace.

Anakin wondered if their similar manner was due to their race or their centuries long adherence to the Jedi Code (or both). He had no clue as even Palpatine hadn't known what race the two belonged to. Anakin wondered if anyone did. Actually, he wondered if those two even did. The fact that Master Yaddle was female and a good 400 years younger than Master Yoda suggested that there had to be a race of them *somewhere.* He knew that information wasn't in the archives (he'd looked himself, as had many other Jedi) and wondered if anyone had actually come outright and asked the ancient Jedi.

The class calmed as Master Kleon rose from his seat at the front of the room and addressed the younglings.

"Good morning, initiates."

They responded in kind as a group. Anakin tried not to roll his eyes as he did every time. The idea of forcing a group of children to respond in such a manner felt demeaning and pointless in his opinion. Still, he did not want to draw any more attention to himself, and so he greeted the Knight as well.

"As you well know," the gran continued, "we have begun a new course of study. As such, each of you will have a one-on-one consultation with Master Yoda or Master Yaddle to determine your progress." Anakin immediately felt the tension in the room spike momentarily before a good deal of it was released to the Force. Apparently the idea of dealing with either of the masters on a group basis was a treat. One-on-one was a different story. It made him wonder if their presence was abnormal or if the two masters would do this on a regular basis. It could be something they did when the initiates reached a certain age, it could be a quarterly or yearly occurrence...or they could be doing this because of him.

He didn't like to think that way. It had been part of what had been such a problem his first time around. What Yoda had said on his first day of classes had been something he'd needed to hear all of his life, he'd just never listened to such advice whenever anyone had told him anything similar before. He was important because he was alive, but the universe did not revolve around him, Chosen One or not. He'd come to realize that other people could be important too (like Padme and Luke and even Obi-wan).

But at the same time, he couldn't dismiss the thought that the masters were here, in the classroom, because of him from his head. Perhaps he'd just ask the other initiates after class...but he didn't want it

confirmed and so was reluctant to do so. It would be better to simply wonder in this instance, just in case.

"You will be called to the next classroom to the north for Master Yoda or the south for Master Yaddle on a random basis. Until you are called in you will practice entering into a meditative trance. Please keep in mind the most recent theory we have discussed as you do so. You may start as soon as the first two initiates have been called. To begin with, Thoran Hilth-Rathon will go with Master Yoda and Marin Tiptron will accompany Master Yaddle."

Trying not to look nervous, Thoran glanced at his group of friends before summoning his confidence and standing. The two small masters jumped calmly (Anakin always had wondered how Yoda could manage to make a jump look almost leisure) down from their chairs and made their ways towards the door. Thoran seemed unsure of what to do for a moment, as did the other boy who had been called. As the other initiates found scattered areas around the room to get comfortable and assume a meditation pose, the two who had been called slowly made their ways over to the Masters and silently followed behind them.

The rest of the class proceeded to be as frustrating as Anakin had expected. Fortunately, Master Kleon seemed preoccupied with most of the rest of the students and only asked if he could help Anakin once. Anakin had declined on account of he didn't want to deal with what he felt would be condescending and useless as his reaction would have a high probability of revealing his homicidal tendencies.

The children who had been called out would come back after anywhere from five to fifteen minutes and inform anyone who asked them that they had been instructed to not disclose what had happened. They all seemed far more at ease after their return to the classroom though so most of the others also relaxed as time passed. Anakin couldn't help but wish that he would be called away from his current exercise in frustration.

The class had maybe twenty minutes left when Anakin was called in to see Master Yaddle. With a prayer to the Force that expressed both his thankfulness that he had finally been called and his annoyance that it had taken so long, he gathered his bag and made his way to the room just south of the Force Techniques classroom.

It was much smaller than the classrooms he was used to and Anakin didn't remember ever having been inside of it before. All of the chairs

and desks had been lined neatly against the walls and the only light came in through the windows near the ceiling. Master Yaddle sat in the middle of the room seeming to be calmly meditating.

Dropping his bag gently by the entrance, Anakin walked into the room, shut the door and bowed respectfully to the Master (who still hadn't opened her eyes, although Anakin knew she had sensed his presence) and then stood in an 'at ease' position as he waited to be instructed.

"Going to stand there all day, are you?" she asked after a minute or so of silence.

"I did not wish to presume familiarity," Anakin said. "You are a Master and therefore you deserve my respect."

She cocked her head and looked up at him for a few moments, studying him thoughtfully. "An ingrained habit this is for you?"

Unfortunately, it was. He'd made the mistake of acting more familiar towards Sidious after he'd taken his Sith name. The resulting punishment had done what years of slavery and Jedi training could not. It had taken the Emperor's special brand of manipulation to finally beat some respect into Anakin's head. It had hurt to lose that familiarity with a man he had considered his mentor, but then, that had been the point. Still, he had little doubt the Jedi Masters would simply conclude that it had been his slavery that had given him such fear/respect towards people with higher 'ranks' than himself. Besides, it didn't stop his internal monologue and only fed his resentment.

Funny how quickly resentment can be turned into anger.

Great, now he was repeating himself.

With a silent sigh he released his feelings to the Force and sat in front of the tiny master. "You could say that, Master," he said in answer to her question.

Yaddle watched him with a raised eyebrow, the only emotion she showed on her otherwise passive face. For several seconds she just studied him and he returned the scrutiny, unable to help himself from comparing her to Yoda. They really were so similar in so many ways and her examination of Anakin now reminded him of when Yoda had cornered him in the training room when he'd first come to the Temple in this time. He found himself even more determined to wait her out and forced his uneasiness at her focused gaze into the Force.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, she shook her head and spoke. "Far more unusual than I expected, you are."

Anakin frowned. "What do you mean, Master?"

The other Jedi cocked her head to the side. "An initiate you are, but have eyes of a Master, you do. Old and tired they are. Seen too much, you have."

Anakin felt his jaw tighten and he looked away, studying the old, plain wall off to the side.

Yaddle didn't speak for almost another entire minute and Anakin came to the conclusion that her strange penchant for uncomfortable silences had to be a race thing. Yoda shared in that particular trait as well.

She finally spoke again, although if Anakin didn't know any better he would say her voice had a forced lightness to it that he'd never really picked up on before.

"Having problems in this class, you are," she said.

Anakin started ever so slightly at her seemingly random, abrupt question. "Yes, Master."

"But understand the theory you do?"

Anakin felt his eyes narrow ever so slightly. If she was assessing them, she knew that already, so why was she asking him? Perhaps because he would be expected to answer, but he hated repeating the same things over and over again. Finally, he simply nodded and replied tersely.

"Yes."

"Know, do you, why put theory into practice you cannot?"

Anakin did not want to answer that question. He most certainly did know but he didn't want to tell her it all came down to the fact that he was used to Sith meditation and was having a problem overcoming his rather ingrained habits.

Then again, she didn't need to know that it was 'Sith' meditation specifically. He frowned ever so slightly as the thought entered his mind and he followed it to its conclusion. All he would have to tell her was that he had learned to meditate differently. He debated with

himself for a few moments, trying to decide whether he should tell her or not. He remembered her from his previous life, calm and steady and always willing to stop and help anyone for the smallest reasons. He hadn't known her all that well, but he had been there when she'd sacrificed herself to save hundreds of thousands of people. She was a good, honorable person who was unlikely to speak of anything he said behind his back.

And so he answered honestly and ignored his misgivings.

"Yes, Master, I do."

Yaddle's other eyebrow rose ever so slightly, almost matching the first one and her ears perked up. "Tell me, can you?"

Anakin momentarily felt his throat close. He was going to explain a dark technique to this woman and he had no idea how she would react. Still, he couldn't exactly back down now.

Taking a deep breath and swallowing the bile rising in the back of his throat, he looked the master directly in the eye and told her. "I learned different meditative techniques," he finally said, happy to note that his voice sounded far more stable than he'd thought it would.

The wrinkled master stroked her chin thoughtfully. Really, all she needed was a gimmer stick and less hair and she could be Yoda's twin. Did everyone from their race look this much alike? He suspected they did.

"Describe these techniques to me, you will."

Anakin frowned slightly. He didn't particularly think that would be the best idea...but what reason could he give for not answering? She'd probably suspect the worst if he refused. The problem was, she wouldn't be that far from the truth.

He thought for a moment, struggling to keep his face blank. He really had been hiding behind Darth Vader's mask for far too long. As a Sith he could frown or smile or grimace or scowl and no one but the Emperor would ever know.

Finally he came to a compromise. If he were vague and left a few things out, he could honestly tell her. He'd just have to be careful. Of course if she did suspect they were based in darkness, it wasn't like it was a secret among the Council. He just wanted to avoid giving them the knowledge that he'd been fully trained as a Sith. He would like

them to trust him eventually, after all. No, he *needed* them to trust him if he was going to tell them about Palpatine. They had to believe him for their own good and the good of the Galaxy.

"It dealt with a focal point," he said finally. "The teachings I have learned here at the Temple focus on blankness and allowing the will of the Force to flow through you. I was taught to connect to the Force with an emotion as a base. It supposedly gives the Force direction."

The master frowned. "A dark technique, this is."

Anakin wanted to sigh. So much for that. And she hadn't even let on as to whether she knew it was a Sith technique or not.

"Yes, Master," he said, looking away. "I know. I refuse to meditate like that anymore. It is why I cannot seem to connect to the Force in its entirety."

The old Master cocked her head in the other direction, still studying Anakin intently. "Focus on power the dark techniques do. Focus on trust the light techniques do. Afraid to trust the Force, are you?"

Anakin turned his stare to her. He didn't answer mainly because he wasn't sure how to respond to that question. Was he afraid to trust the Force? Qui-gon had asked him the exact same question. He couldn't answer himself then and he seemed to be having just as much difficulty now.

Why though? Why couldn't he answer himself? Was it because he didn't want to? Or was it because he couldn't face the answer he feared? After all, if he didn't trust the Force and he didn't trust himself, who could he trust?

Padme. Perhaps Luke and maybe even his daughter (although he'd have to meet her first), but at least two of those options were not...well, options at the moment. Even the third option was out of his reach. So who could he trust? It deeply unsettled him that he could think of no one. He would never trust a Jedi again, not after Obi-wan and the Council. He would count himself particularly stupid if he even entertained the idea of trusting a darksider and he didn't know many non-sensitive beings. With the exception of Padme, he didn't feel he could trust them either if only because Palpatine could tear their minds apart if he so desired

He really had no one. And that scared him. Deeply.

Yaddle must have sensed his feelings because she reached out with the Force to sooth him. It didn't help a great deal, but it did give him something to focus on. He used that to force himself to remain calm.

"So, true it is," Master Yaddle said after a moment, her voice full of sadness.

Anakin had to crush another wave of panic. Her saying it made it far more real and thus, to his mind, far more of a problem.

"Why, may I ask?"

"What?" Anakin replied, his voice shaky. He hoped with all his heart that she had not just asked what she had asked.

"Why trust in the Force can you not?"

She had. A wave of emotion he could not contain rushed through him and with it came the angry answer. He couldn't trust in the Force because he'd been there and done that before and his entire world had collapsed around him. If the Force's will was always ultimately done, than it would stand to reason that it had been the will of the Force that he'd fallen. It had been the will of the Force to destroy Alderaan and so many other races along with their planets (perhaps not as dramatically as with the Death Star, but one didn't need to blow up a planet to destroy it). It meant he was supposed to have been in pain and darkness so deep he could not hope to break free from it himself and it meant he was supposed to bring pain to those around him...

And he couldn't accept that. No one deserved to live the life of a Sith. So why had the Force let him fall? Driven him to it, even. Or did Palpatine have *that* much power over it (and he would never trust that man or anyone/anything who served him again)? Anakin did not want to go back to that life, and if that was what the Force wanted then it could shove itself down a black hole. He'd served his time, hadn't he? Isn't that what Qui-gon had said? And Anakin *wanted* to believe it so badly. If karma or the Force or whatever wanted him to pay more for what he'd done, then he would do so by saving every life he could...with maybe the exception of Palpatine. His unofficial vow even included Dooku because after everything the Count had done and all of the pain that had been wrought by his hands in the previous timeline, Anakin still didn't couldn't stand the idea of him falling. After all, if he could prevent Dooku from turning, then maybe—just maybe—he could prevent himself from turning too.

Obi-wan had once told Anakin the Force loved him, clung to him and

was a part of him in a way he'd never seen. Qui-gon had said almost the same thing, though not in so many words, but the intent had been there. If what had happened to him in his past life was the Force 'loving' him, then he would very happily live without it.

"It has betrayed my trust," Anakin said, his voice low but with only the barest hint of bitterness. He stated it more like he was stating a fact than anything else. "Multiple times. How can I believe in something like that?"

Yaddle seemed troubled by his answer, and he couldn't blame her. "Sure, you are, that betrayed you the Force did."

His lips tightened. "I don't see how it could have been anything else."

The old Force-user nodded gravely. "Revealed much to me, you have. Your own answer you must find, but tell you this I will: if trust in the Force you cannot, a Jedi you can never be. Also, if trust in the Force you cannot, then stay away from the darkness I fear you cannot."

That troubled Anakin greatly. When he'd trusted in the Force he'd fallen. Now the old Jedi Master was saying that if he didn't trust in the Force he would fall? Screwed if he did and screwed if he didn't. Stang.

Master Yaddle seemed to be thinking again and Anakin turned his own thoughts back towards her, not wanting to dwell on his unpleasant revelation.

"So, trust in the Force you cannot. Trust in me, can you?"

No.

He shook his head. "I don't know, Master. I am not used to...trust."

The master nodded as if she'd expected that answer. "Then do this, can you? Trust in me that hurt you, I will not? Your full trust you need not place in me."

Anakin thought about that for a moment before nodding slowly. He could do that. It wouldn't be a lot, and it might help him take a step in the right direction in any case.

"Yes, I think I can do that."

Master Yaddle smiled at him, the first smile he'd seen from her in this lifetime. "Then look for me in the Force you should and help you I

will. No bond have we, but teach some things to you, I can. Just remember, if worried you are about the Force, then trust in my presence. If pull away, you do, allow you I will. Your choice it will be."

Anakin glanced over his shoulder at the door. "But what of the other students you need to see, Master?"

The diminutive master shrugged. "Take care of them Master Yoda will."

The former Sith wasn't so sure, but he figured that whatever mess would come up between the Masters because of this would be their problem, not his. Shrugging the thought away, he assumed a meditation position and closed his eyes, reaching out for the Force. It answered his call immediately and he sought for Master Yaddle's presence. It wasn't difficult to find. She shone like a beacon of light before him. She wasn't as strong as Master Yoda, but she had a depth and understanding of the Force that easily rivaled her fellow Master's.

After a moment of observing the presence, he noticed that she had reached out towards him in the Force. His first instinct was to back away, but he made himself calm down and reach back, brushing her presence as if to take a proffered hand. It had been a while since he'd touched anyone else's presence like this. Luke. Yes, it had been with Luke. Too bad he'd tried to reach out from the Dark Side then. The last time he had done this with the Light Side had been...probably during the Clone Wars. The sensation brought with it a strange sort of nostalgia that appealed to him, but he was still wary and worried.

Trust me. The general feeling of encouragement drifted towards him and wrapped itself around him. He took a deep breath and relaxed, releasing his thoughts and worries and focusing on Master Yaddle, allowing her to lead him a little further into the Force. She wouldn't allow him to be hurt. He knew that and he kept repeating it over and over in his mind.

After a while, it became easier and he began to marvel at the experience. It felt so familiar. Even in his death it hadn't felt like this because then it had been his whole being. He still felt himself rooted to the real world and he couldn't stop himself from checking every so often to make sure that the link was still there, but other than that slight worry, he could only really describe the experience as something akin to coming home.

It took him a few minutes, but eventually he realized that Master Yaddle had done what Master Kleon didn't have the time or ability to do right now: she'd led him into a mild but still very steady Force-trance. Simply by following her gentle example, he'd been able to do in minutes what he'd been unable to do with months of practicing on his own. He found the realization humbling and eye-opening. Even with all of his knowledge of the Force he still needed guidance. It was a sobering thought.

Even I need guidance at times. The vague but unmistakable idea came from Master Yaddle with what would have been an amused chuckle aloud. He thought it strange that she didn't seem to think in the odd, backwards style of talking that she and Master Yoda always spoke in. Then again, it could just be how the Force or his mind interpreted it. Even on his best days with Obi-wan he couldn't speak with actual words, he could only communicate with general feelings and simple thoughts. Truthfully what had been unique about their bond was the sheer range. Obi-wan could be on the other side of the planet and Anakin could usually sense him with a great deal of clarity, especially during the Clone Wars.

Memories of such times arose, unbidden and he watched as several successes and a few failures flitted across his mind. He almost instinctively backed away from them as he'd made a habit of doing for the last two decades but paused when he recognized yet another ingrained habit. Why should he shun these memories? They were a part of his past had little negative associated with them, at least comparatively. And therein lay the reason. As a Sith, he avoided such distracting feelings like those of camaraderie or worry for others and relief at their continued existence when all was said and done.

He frowned at the thought. The Emperor had said that the Dark Side was the true essence of the Force. The Jedi said the Light was the true essence, but how could one or the other be the true essence if both Dark and Light were aspects of the Force? Always in opposition and yet always a part of the other as well. After all, one could not have light without knowing darkness, and one could not know of darkness until at least a single memory of the light chased it away.

Funny, the Jedi had believed that his destiny to 'balance the Force' was to eliminate the darkness due to the time period when the prophecy had been made. At the time, 'balance' had only been achieved after the chaos of the Dark Side had been defeated. To the Jedi, the Dark Side and any knowledge of it brought disorder and pain. Only the Light Side brought peace and balance. It was a valid

point, but was it the true meaning? As far as he knew, it could be. He'd practically eliminated the Sith Order when he'd killed Palpatine to save Luke and then died himself in the other timeline. True, other Sith could eventually rise, but they would be weaker because the line had been broken and generations of knowledge lost. Then again, the Jedi would undoubtedly be weaker in many aspects too. If he thought about it, he'd actually fulfilled both translations of the prophecy in his first timeline. Would he be expected to fulfill both now?

It was a welcome strangeness to be able to really think about his different dilemmas again from within the Force. It always brought a sense of clarity and would often give hints about the future (although he hadn't gotten any such hints this time and couldn't help but be thankful for that).

That was when he noticed the strange sensation emanating from Master Yaddle's presence. Reluctantly, he found the connection to his body and followed it back. When he opened his eyes, he met the worried gaze of the old Master.

"Master?" he asked cautiously.

"See things in the Force often, do you?"

He frowned, wondering if she'd seen his memories (as those had been the only images he'd seen this time). But then, how could she see his thoughts without a bond? And even if she could, she had little reason to believe them to be anything other than possible futures. Either that, or she'd just sensed something about him that had given her the conclusion that he was having some sort of vision.

"Yes," he answered in the same tone he'd spoke with before.

"Come true, do they; what you see in the Force?"

At this he couldn't help a sad smile that tugged at the cornered of his mouth. "All too often, but not always."

Master Yaddle nodded distractedly as she rubbed her chin with one claw. After a few moments, she glanced back at him, calm smile back in place.

"Improved remarkably you have. Perhaps more private tutoring some of the Council members and Masters can give. Discuss it I will with Master Yoda."

Anakin blinked as he digested her words and then it took every ounce of willpower he had to not allow his jaw to drop in shock. Was she offering to teach him? Regularly? Not on a Padawan/Master level, but it was still a huge commitment that she probably didn't really have time for.

"T-thank you, Master," he said with a bow as he stood.

"Dismissed, you are," she said. "If left any others are, send them to me you should."

"Yes, Master," Anakin said again. Then he turned, grabbed his bag and strode out of the door in a bit of a daze he was unable to break away from for the rest of the evening.

xXx

Yoda noticed Yaddle's troubled state long before he reached the room she was in. He'd actually felt that her presence in the Force was off for almost an hour and having to assess the rest of this children on his own had confirmed that something had indeed come up.

Yaddle was his oldest and dearest living friend. If he had been anyone else, he might have wanted to preserve the only link to his race that he still had, or he might want to cling to the only one of his comrades who had lived longer than the average galactic century, but he was Jedi Grandmaster Yoda and he had long ago let such things go to the Force. Still, after knowing someone for so long, he'd grown to understand her very well, and he knew that the fact that she had not technically 'finished' the duty she had volunteered for said a great deal about her state of mind, and she wanted others to know. This was not something she felt should be handled by herself, and so she had left subtle clues that she'd known he would read correctly.

She sat on a chair by one of the old classroom's windows, staring out at the Courscanti sunset and the tightly-controlled traffic lanes, barely visible in the distance. He didn't even need to voice a question as she spoke not long after he'd stopped a meter or so behind her.

"Spoke with young Skywalker I did," she said, not turning to face him. "Troubling, he is."

Yoda agreed wholeheartedly on that account, and yet he saw something in the boy that seemed to call out to him for help. It was a cry he'd always found incredibly difficult to ignore when it came from another sentient, let alone from a fellow Force-user.

Nodding his head, he walked forward, noting that she had placed a chair opposite of her own and jumped up onto it with barely a second thought. His annoyance at living in a universe that catered to much larger species than himself had also been something he'd released to the Force permanently centuries before.

"Help him, you could?" he asked, leaning his head on his gimmer stick and watching her closely. She still hadn't turned to look at him.

He expected her to nod if only because he'd felt the boy's presence join with the Force himself. Yaddle, however, surprised him by looking away from the beautiful, orange and red sunset, although she still didn't meet his gaze.

"Help him touch the Force I could. Difficult it was. Trust in the Force he cannot." Yoda frowned at her wording. She knew the subtle but very real difference between 'cannot' and 'will not'. "Believes the Force has hurt him, he does. Worried, I am, that a shallow, common fear it is not."

Yoda cocked his head curiously. "Know we do that a difficult past he has."

She shook her head again and for the first time in the conversation, locked gazes with him. Her eyes conveyed a deep worry and sadness that had not been there before. It would take a great deal of effort to let these emotions go to the Force and he knew she had her work cut out for her. "Fear, I do, that worse than we believed it is."

The Grandmaster did *not* like the sound of that. "Why say that, do you?"

She sighed and looked away again. "While helping him touch the Force, saw things I did. Visions, they were not. Memories of visions, they were not, and come from him, they did."

Yoda didn't say anything, knowing she would expound on her own terms. After a few moments, she tried to explain what she had seen.

"See little I did, as a bond we do not share. But places I saw, planets and wars and ships. Unlike anything I have seen before, they were. Felt like memories they did," she said softly. "Difficult memories full of pain and sorrow but also of hope and joy. Tainted they were by his experiences, both for good and bad. Felt the deepest depths of hate, the boy has. Felt the grandest heights of love the boy has. A long struggle he yet has ahead of him and yet fear, I do, that weary of

fighting he is.

"Also a boy in the memories, he was not. From a man's perspective they were."

And for the first time in a good long while, Yoda couldn't even begin to know what to make of the situation described to him. It wasn't a pleasant feeling. "Memories, you say. How can this be?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I know not. Only know, I do, that detailed and full of sensations, both physical and in the Force, they were."

"Ask him of these you did not?"

Yaddle didn't speak for a moment, but she turned to look at her fellow Jedi again when she did. "If trust in the Force he cannot, then why trust in me would he?"

The Grandmaster had to admit that she had a point. Now it was his turn to gaze, troubled, out of the window. "A mistake have we made by allowing the boy to train?" he asked.

"Know that, I do not," Yaddle said. "But know this I do; right the mind-healer is. Different needs than the other Jedi has he. Needs that meet we currently cannot."

Yoda frowned ever so slightly at that. Master Xio had come before them after Healer Girth's session with young Skywalker. She had not seemed pleased to be the one talking to the Council about the situation, but some of the points she had brought up in the drall's name had been valid and worrisome.

Perhaps it was time to bring the Healer before the Council to present his reservations personally. If they as Jedi could not properly meet the young initiate's needs...

FearHateDarkness enveloping everything, tainting and weaving itself through the galaxy, leaving nothing untouched...

Yoda's frown deepened. The Force told him that helping Anakin Skywalker was imperative. It had been one of the truly clear impressions he'd gotten recently. If they could not meet the boy's needs, then perhaps they would have to make exceptions, or worse yet, perhaps they would have to make changes to the current code. The idea did not sit well with Yoda as every time a change had been made while he had been a Jedi, the result had been disastrous for a

great many who belonged to the order...too many, in his opinion. And yet, if that was what the Force was trying to tell them...

"Meditate on this, I will," Yoda finally said as he went to hop down from the chair.

"As will I," Yaddle agreed.

He didn't bid her farewell; he didn't need to. They hadn't had to express such trivialities for a good many years. He knew that she knew his heart went out to her, as it did to all those in need of Jedi assistance.

He immediately made for his private meditation room. With the clouding of the Force recently and the very nature of the problem, he knew that finding an answer would take a while and there was no better time to begin preparations than the present.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Gah! I thought I'd posted this already! My apologies for being so late.

Well, I have to say I got some interesting reviews. LOL Someone even reviewed in Haiku. I also learned that the whole Didi's Cafe to Dex's Diner was in a comic book and in that comic book it changed before Anakin became a padawan. Well, I'm going to go with bookverse that says it changed half-way through Anakin's training (Check out book 4, I think it is—could be book 5 or 6, but I think it was 4). Thanx for the explanation! :)

Also, someone commented that I have been mentioning my beta reader too much and should stop. Well, my dear, you have obviously never been a beta reader and don't know what it entails. I'm sorry you feel that way, but as far as I'm concerned, you can very well stop reading (or at least stop reading the notes at the end) because I most certainly WILL NOT stop singing her praises! The only reason you even HAVE this story AT ALL is because for two years, she let me send her random e-mails for the story, which she would tear apart and then send back, after which point I would basically have to rewrite everything. If she had not done that, I wouldn't have even gotten CLOSE to posting this at all because I did not know where to go with it. She deserves every single good word I have given her and more. So there. Please don't send me anything more about it because that is going to be my final say. Batfan7 is AWESOME!

P.S. Don't worry if I haven't answered your comments yet, I will. :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> Note: There will be some Siriwan in this fic. You have been warned. (Also, please note that I did not plan it that way from the beginning. It just kind of snuck up on me.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Obi-wan couldn't believe he was walking into the hospital wing willingly when unhurt. He vaguely wondered if something was wrong with him after all, but immediately dismissed the thought. Even if there was, he could handle it on his own. No need to go worrying people (especially certain Mon Calamari healers) for no reason.

After informing the Padawan on duty at the front desk of who he wished to speak to, he stood in the waiting area and focused on not shifting nervously. The Healer's Wing *always* made him nervous. Fortunately, he'd been there for only a few minutes when Bant hurried out from a hall towards him.

"Obi-wan! You're back! I'm so relieved," she said as he embraced him. He couldn't help but smile as she did so. It certainly felt very good to be back, and all in one piece.

"Bant," he said, stepping away and allowing her to see his smile.

Her own smile faded and she looked him over hurriedly. "So where are you hurt?"

Obi-wan blinked in mild surprise. "I didn't get hurt this time," he said.

She seemed a bit taken back herself and immediately narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "Don't you even think about trying to dodge out of—"

"Bant," Obi-wan said, taking hold of her large, flipper-like hands. "I'm not hurt."

Confusion warred with relief as she glanced over him one final time. "Oh. Well that's good. But then why are you here?"

Obi-wan wasn't sure whether to feel a bit guilty at that or amused that she knew him so well. "I came to let you know I was back," he said.

She still seemed suspicious but she didn't pull away from him. "That's all?"

He sighed. Had he really been that neglectful of his friends? "That is all."

He saw a warm, touched smile come to her lips and she blinked her large, silver eyes again before looking away. "Thank you," she said softly. He felt the relief and gratefulness and hope all rise within her as she spoke the words. Hope for what though? He frowned, not sure if he should ask her, or if he even could put such a strange question into words.

"It's good to have you back, Obi-wan," she said in an even quieter voice. "We missed you."

Somehow he thought he'd misunderstood something. "I was only away from the Temple for a little over a week," he replied, confused.

She shook her head in exasperation and drew him into another hug. "Definitely my Obi-wan."

Yes, he'd definitely missed something. After a moment he dismissed it as either a female thing or a Mon Calamari thing and just accepted the hug while mentally patting himself on the back for getting her to smile so sincerely. He was glad now that he'd overcome his discomfort to come and see Bant.

"Oh!" the healer suddenly said, almost startling Obi-wan and he leaned away from her. "Right! Obi-wan, guess what?"

Obi-wan raised an eyebrow in question. "What?"

"Siri woke up!"

A surge of feelings he wasn't able to fully identify rose within him at her proclamation. Now he was doubly glad he'd come.

"She did? Is she alright? Can I see her?"

Bant smiled but it held a bit of a sadness to it. "Yes, you can see her, but..."

Obi-wan's own smile fell from his face. "But what?"

The Mon Calmari shook her head. "She's different, Obi-wan." He felt his heart freeze at the other Jedi's words and a deep ache rose within

his chest. He suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

"Different?" he asked worriedly.

"Yes," Bant nodded. "It isn't unusual after comas like that, but you need to know that she's lucky to be here at all. We weren't sure if she would ever awaken."

Obi-wan forced his feelings on the matter down and tried to look at it objectively. "Do you know why she woke?" He hoped she hadn't heard the waver in his voice but figured she probably had. Still, as one of his oldest friends, she knew better than to say anything and didn't even acknowledge it.

"No. We don't know what caused it or what cured it, but we do think it had something to do with a Force vision of some sort."

"What do you mean?" Obi-wan asked, his brow furrowing.

Bant shook her head, allowing the barest hint of frustration to leak out through her actions. "She'll babble randomly, and we can't make sense of it. Sometimes she insists that she's dead or that all of the Jedi are dead and that we shouldn't be here. Sometimes she seems to forget large events that have happened in her life and other times she seems completely coherent. It's been getting better, but we're worried about the fact that she still has relapses, especially since we've been unable to find any serious brain damage whatsoever."

"I see," the young man said slowly. Now he wasn't quite so sure he wanted to see her. What if she didn't remember him? Or worse yet, what if she did but remembered only part of what they'd been through together? What would she say to him? Would she continue to act as the cool, aloof Jedi acquaintance that she had become ever since... Or would she return to treating him as she had before? He wasn't sure he could handle it if she was the same person she'd been before their confession. And yet the idea of not seeing her... Part of him, a large part of him, wanted to run away and ignore that all of this was happening. And yet, he could still remember Anakin's words. Other people would find his death difficult. Would that include Siri?

His miniature bout of indecision was cured by a hand on his arm, and he looked down to see the scaly skin of his crechemate.

"If she is to recover, she'll need friends, Obi-wan. She'll need you there." She must have read the conflict in his expression or in the Force because, as usual, she said just what he needed to hear.

A month ago he would have acknowledged her words and then turned around and walked out, but not now. He would face his worries and fears as a Jedi Knight should. Well, at least this small one in any case.

"May I visit her now?"

And there was that hope that seemed to well inside his friend again.

"Of course, Obi-wan," she said with a grin. "This way."

He knew the way, but he let her take him through the halls and to Siri's room. He couldn't quite squash the nervousness in his stomach (and there was little he hated more than nervousness; he was a Knight for Force's sake! He should be past all of this!), but he followed anyway. His emotions rose to a stomach-wrenching peak when Bant stopped just before the rather familiar door and turned to him.

"Come and let me know when you leave. We can make some plans to meet later and catch up. I think Garen and his Master are back as well."

The idea of all three of them getting together again did a great deal to calm his nerves and he appreciated her all the more for it.

"Thank you, Bant," he said, shooting her one last smile before he turned to the door. He hesitated for the barest second as he felt the hawk-bats in his stomach start flying around again, but with a grim determination, he stepped through the door and into the room.

Siri sat in bed reading a data pad and looking far better than she had when he'd come earlier. She had no tubes or needles in her skin and she'd tied her hair back into a smooth pony tail. He'd been unconsciously shielding his presence so she didn't seem to be expecting him. She looked up, startled, when he came through the door and then just stared at him with an unreadable expression. He didn't know what he'd expected; a cool 'hello' maybe? Or perhaps an overly-cheery 'hi'? Or even a very sincere 'hello, thanks for coming'. Having her stare at him like he really shouldn't be there, like he was some sort of anomaly that she couldn't wrap her mind around, almost had him turning and walking back out of the room, dismissing his misguided actions in coming here as a large mistake.

"Obi-wan?" she asked finally. Immediately all thoughts of leaving vanished from his mind only to be replaced by worry. He'd heard a tremor in her voice that he'd never heard from her before. "Y-you're here?"

Summoning his courage, he walked towards her, smiling.

"Did you honestly think I wouldn't come to see if you're—"

Before he could say any more she threw off the covers and jumped forward. That suddenly, he found his arms full of one slightly younger woman, just having the presence of mind to note that the top of her blond head obscured half of his vision. She'd wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her head in his shoulder. He was so surprised it took him a moment to realize that she was shaking. It took him even longer to understand that she was *crying*.

Without looking up, she began to speak, her words muffled but still quite audible.

"You were gone! Not just to the Force, but *gone* gone! I thought I'd never see you again! I thought..." And then she stepped back, glaring up at him with angry, red-rimmed eyes and a very wet face. "Don't you *ever* do that to me again, Obi-wan Kenobi! Do you understand me? You and your over-developed sense of responsibility and your under-developed sense of self preservation who can't seem to wrap your mind around the fact that other people *care* for you and..."

She faded off, trying to control her sobbing. He wasn't sure what she was talking about, but the lecture had gone a long way to soothe his worries. It was so like Siri to take him to task like that (even if he still wasn't sure what for). The crying on the other hand wasn't like her, and he really didn't know how to deal with a crying woman.

"Hey," he said after a moment, reaching out and putting a hand on her arm to ground her in the here and now. He could see what Bant meant now, but he still felt relieved. If this was the worst of the changes then it really wasn't nearly as bad as he'd feared. She may be more emotional and have a bit less control, but it was still Siri. "Hey, I'm here now. I'm alive and I plan on staying that way for a long while yet."

She let out a sound that seemed to be both a sob and a laugh and leaned forward, resting her head against his shoulder again. He stiffened involuntarily, suddenly realizing how close she was to him and he wasn't sure how to act. Should he comfort her? Put his arms around her? Or would she consider that breaking his promise?

After a few moments, when she didn't move, he slowly moved his arms up and around her, half expecting her to jump back and begin tearing into him again, but she didn't. She just stayed there for several

minutes and leaned on his shoulder while he rocked slowly back and forth and sent out soothing waves of reassurance through the Force.

After what could have been minutes or hours, she turned her head to the side but didn't move from his embrace. He was surprised that this didn't feel more awkward than it did but wasn't about to complain.

"Idiot," she finally said after a moment. "You self-sacrificing idiot."

"What can I say? It's a character flaw," he said with a shrug.

She snorted. "You don't even know what I'm talking about."

Obi-wan was by no means a mind-healer, but wasn't acknowledging that she knew she wasn't 'all there', so to speak, a good thing? He hoped so.

"Care to enlighten me?"

She sighed and pulled away. He felt a momentary pang of regret at the loss of their closeness but wasn't about to push it. They'd made that decision already and Siri wasn't one to be pushed anyway. That had actually been one trait that had attracted him to her to begin with.

"You wouldn't believe me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Try me."

She sat on the edge of her bed grimly, looking down at the carpet. "I can't tell you all of it. Some of it isn't my secret to tell. Some of it I...I don't remember and some of it..." she faded off. "Some of it is just too painful right now."

He dragged a chair up and sat down across from her. "Then tell me what you can."

She glanced up at him for a moment and he hated seeing that wary, skeptical gleam in her eye. Finally she nodded and looked down.

"Alright. In the future..." she paused and sighed. "Let's just say it goes downhill really, *really* fast. About twelve years from now the Republic stops existing and becomes an Empire."

Obi-wan felt ice begin to form in his stomach even through his confusion. How did she know this? Was she talking about a vision? "The Jedi would never let that happen," he said.

She snorted derisively. "No, they wouldn't. That's why they were exterminated."

That ball of ice grew into carbonite and seemed to spread throughout his veins. "How is that possible?" he asked, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice. The very thought of all the hundreds of *trained* Jedi suddenly destroyed? It was *unthinkable.* Not to mention that the public would cry out. True there were several people on several worlds that didn't care for the Jedi, but many of the same types of people didn't seem to care for police and security forces either. The majority of the universe, as far as he knew, would be outraged and horrified if the Jedi were eliminated. Could everything change so much in just twelve years?

Siri shook her head wistfully. "It's possible through a very well laid plan of a Sith Lord."

Obi-wan had thought he couldn't feel any more nauseous. He'd thought wrong. He actually had to swallow bile back at her words. She seemed so sure that it frightened him, even if he couldn't wrap his head around exactly *how* something like that could happen.

"But Master Yoda and Master Windu—" he started to protest, but she cut him off.

"You and Master Yoda were two of the few Jedi that survived. E-even the younglings..." she faded off and Obi-wan had to stand, half so that he could be sure he wouldn't throw up on her and half because pacing had always calmed him somewhat and helped him think through problems.

"How?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I...not now. Not yet. I—please don't make me answer that right now. I can give a few basics but..." A shudder ran through her body and she drew in on herself, raising her hands to rub at her arms as if she were suddenly cold. Obi-wan noted how pale her skin had gotten again and sudden worry for her forced him to reconsider his line of questioning. He really shouldn't question her while she was still so sick and in the medical wing.

In one smooth movement, he sat in the chair again and reached out for her hand, grasping it tightly. "Alright," he said in as kind and understanding of a voice as he could manage. "You can go on if you wish or we can stop. It's up to you."

"I...I need to say something. I have to get this out," she whispered. "It's too much for me I..."

"Alright, then," Obi-wan said as firmly as he could. "Please, continue."

She nodded. "One of the Jedi—someone you knew well...he turned and became a Sith." And there was that nauseous feeling again, a sort of fluttering in his stomach combined with a disbelieving horror, but he couldn't speak in denial against Siri now. Even if he didn't fully understand her, he could feel the secret like a cancerous darkness, pushing from within her. He didn't like what he was hearing, but even if this vision or whatever it was wouldn't come true (oh please, *please* don't let it come true!) contradicting her at the moment would just shut her down, which would be counter productive in every way imaginable.

"Who?" he heard himself choke out somehow.

She shook her head. "That...that isn't my secret to tell. He...he did the most horrible things, Obi-wan. He killed all the younglings! He *destroyed* the Order! He killed *you*! And I...I had to watch it all."

Obi-wan swallowed again, forcing himself to focus on Siri and not the fact that even just hearing these things made him want to vomit.

"If you saw it all, why didn't he kill you?" Obi-wan asked.

Siri smiled, although it held no mirth whatsoever. "I was already dead."

A lead weight dropped somewhere inside of Obi-wan and he couldn't open his mouth for several seconds as he just stared at her. Siri? *Dead*? He couldn't imagine any life where she wasn't apart of it. The very idea...

He was definitely not eating dinner tonight. How could he eat if he could barely breathe?

"Then...then how...you died? How could you watch something after you died?" he forced himself to ask. Focus on the task at hand. Keep her talking. *There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

When she smiled this time it was sadder but softer too. "There is no death, there is the Force. I never joined with the Force but kept my consciousness separate...I think."

It was as if she had finished his thought process. He double checked his mental shields but they were firmly in place. "You think?" he asked, just to have something to say that would keep her talking.

She shifted uneasily. "It gets a bit blurry after that and I just remember feelings and significant events."

Obi-wan was almost afraid to ask, but did so anyway. "Like what?"

Siri looked down again, radiating such an intense sadness suddenly that he had to stop himself from standing and putting his arms around her.

"Like...when you wanted to give him another chance so...so you did."

Alright, that made no sense at all whatsoever.

"What?" he asked. "Why? How?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "But you...you stopped existing after that."

And for some reason, of all the things she'd said that had horrified him so, that one was the worst. He could live with being a non-entity. He could handle not being a major, important figure that everyone knew and idolized. After all, Jedi don't crave those types of things and he had resigned himself to (embraced, even) the rather thankless position most Jedi found themselves in long ago. He'd come to accept that that was simply the fate of a Jedi. But not continuing to *exist*... He didn't know why that scared him so.

"Stopped...existing..."

She nodded. "Even in the Force. I...I was supposed to help him. I...I think that's why I was in a coma, because I couldn't exist at the same time that I lived."

Obi-wan felt more worry at her words but this time it was directed mainly towards her. She was getting harder and harder to understand. The concern he'd had before, when Bant had told him about her, came back with a vengeance. He ruthlessly squashed it down. This could just be her trying to put her vision into words which, as he knew, could be extremely difficult. It didn't mean she was mentally unstable.

"Hey," he said, squeezing her hand reassuringly. "We'll stop it. We'll make sure that this vision never comes to being, alright?"

She didn't look horribly convinced but he could tell she appreciated the sentiment. His mind was whirling and he couldn't seem to think through all of the admittedly vague but still horrifying information he'd been given. He needed time to think, and he could tell that she did too, now that she'd purged that all from her system, so to speak.

"You look tired. Why don't you get some sleep?"

Siri smiled weakly and nodded. He stood and she stood with him.

"I can see myself out," he said with a disapproving frown and he gestured back to the bed. "You should—"

Yet again she'd moved before he'd expected anything, and as it wasn't life-threatening, he hadn't felt any warning through the Force. It took him all too long to realize that she had stepped forward and pressed her lips to his. He was so surprised he just sat there for several seconds wondering what he should do, but she didn't stop and he...he really didn't want to either. He could feel that she needed this, somehow, and not just through the Force. It was in the way she kissed him and the dam he'd built to contain those feelings was leaking rather badly and he really, *really* wanted to respond...but he'd promised and—

She leaned back ever so slightly. "You never stop thinking, do you?" she asked, then looked down and shook her head. "Obi-wan, you never broke your promise to me."

Still in shock, it was several minutes before his mind began working again. "Siri..." he said, a little too breathlessly for his liking. Had she been reading his mind again? Did she know some way to get past his shields? He wasn't sure if he liked or disliked that idea (although he definitely wasn't fond of the confusion such a conflict brought).

He shook the thought from his head and focused on the situation at hand. They still shouldn't do this because it went against their decision and the Jedi Code to say the least, and besides, she wasn't well...but she seemed to have collected herself rather quickly, and he couldn't seem to force himself to let her go...

"I'm so sorry," she said, and was she crying again? He began to realize just how badly both the horrible vision and the coma had affected her. Siri had never cared for rules and believed that for the most part the ends justified the means, but she'd always had control of herself. Even as a padawan there had been very few times when she hadn't had at least a modicum of self control. Seeing her like this...she *had* changed.

He just wasn't sure it would be for the better or worse in the long run.

She went on speaking through her tears. "I'm sorry I ever made you promise that. I never regretted staying at the Temple, but I always regretted how it was between us. I...I never stopped loving you, you know."

"Siri," he said again feeling like his heart would break all over again, "I...don't think...I mean..."

"It's the same old argument, isn't it? The same no-win scenario all because we were born with the ability to touch the Force."

She shook her head again and stepped away. He didn't move to stop her no matter how much he wanted to. "I'm not myself, I think," she muttered. "I've lost all my self control and...I'm sorry. I'm sorry for doing that to you right now, for bringing it up. It's just," she looked back at him, her eyes wet again and somehow she looked like she was about to break. He'd never seen her that fragile. 'Siri' and 'fragile' didn't belong in the same sentence.

"It's just that I couldn't let you leave again without you knowing," she finally said.

He didn't respond for several seconds as he tried to put his thoughts into coherent sentences in his mind.

Finally he somehow managed to find what he needed to say. "I...always knew."

She sighed and walked back to her bed. "That doesn't mean I should have done that just now. It isn't fair to you."

And there was the awkwardness he'd been expecting from the beginning.

"Feeling it through the Force makes it stronger too," she concluded wryly. "And now it will be harder to contain. But I just couldn't bear... Stang, what have I become? Who am I now?"

Her words scared him more than he cared to admit, and he hated seeing her like that. The self-reproach poured off of her in spiraling waves and he couldn't stop himself from saying *something*.

"Don't be," he muttered.

"What?" she asked.

He gulped and looked away, feeling a blush rising to his cheeks. "Don't be sorry," he said. "I...am glad. It is better to be honest, is it not?"

She blinked up at him for several seconds and he felt his cheeks grow even hotter.

"And you won't regret it?" she asked a little sardonically. He liked hearing that tone from her because that was the Siri he remembered.

He knew he'd have to answer her carefully, though. "I...might in the future."

She raised an eyebrow almost flirtatiously although he was sure she just meant it as teasing. "But you don't now?"

He cleared his throat, still having a hard time looking at her. Then he realized how he must appear—shifting around and causing her even more stress by being shy and uncertain. He probably seemed like a cowering, frightened Padawan, but he wasn't. Immediately he forced himself to stand tall and stare straight at her like the Jedi Knight he was.

"No, I don't."

Her smile was both grateful and sad. "It's nice to know that you're just as human as the rest of us, Mister Perfect Jedi."

He found himself looking away again although his voice didn't lose any of its firmness. "I'm not perfect."

She snorted again and chuckled as if enjoying her own, private joke. Then she grew serious again.

"Obi-wan, focus on being the best Jedi you can be, but please don't bury me. Don't deny that what you feel for me exists. I know how much it will hurt..." she paused for a moment, a hand clutching at the front of her healer's robe, "And I know that you probably have no idea just how much as of yet, but...someone told me something recently: that ignoring the fact that these feelings exist doesn't fix anything. It may very well be the only thing I will ever agree with that person on. The thing is, if you decide we would be better off without these feelings, then we can work through them together and overcome them. But you need to know that...I'll follow you wherever you want to go if you ever decide to leave. Even years—decades—from now..."

she glanced up at him with that soft, alluring smile that he saw so rarely on her. "All you have to do is ask."

She suddenly looked reproachful and her tone hardened. "But if you ever want to ask, you'd better do it and let me decide for myself! If I ever find out you tried to decide for me to spare me some perceived pain or other such nonsense, you'll regret it!"

He was more confused now than ever, and yet, as he watched her sit there and wait for his confirmation, he couldn't help but feel almost giddy. He also felt somehow dressed down and scolded, but the realization didn't bring up his normal guilt or defensiveness.

"I'll remember that," he finally said with a smile and turned to leave. Before he could, though, she called out again.

"Obi-wan." He paused at the door and turned to see her starting at him with that same cross, threatening expression he'd seen on her hundreds of times. "You'd better come back and visit me before you go on another mission. Multiple times if it's a long break."

He considered that for a moment before nodding. "Of course."

"I mean it," she said, her voice laced with a threat. "If you leave without telling me, I'll steal a ship and hunt you down, got it?"

And he could see her doing it too. He couldn't help but chuckle at the image of her sneaking through the Temple in the healer's wing gown and sliding into a ship before blasting her way out of the hangar and stomping into the middle of a fragile situation or fight just to give him a piece of her mind.

"I promise," he said, unable to keep the amusement from his tone at the thought.

She almost immediately relaxed against her pillows. "Okay then."

He raised an eyebrow. "You were so worried a few seconds ago, and now you believe me just like that?" he asked playfully.

Siri shrugged. "You'd rather die than not keep a promise. But if you end up dead, I'll drag your spirit back from the Force and then kill you myself."

He laughed outright as he strode out of the room. Somehow he could see her doing that too.

xXx

Anakin shifted uncomfortably as he stood amidst a group of 10-12 initiates and Padawans in front of the Jedi Council. It wouldn't have been so bad if both Darra and Ferus hadn't been in the group too. At least he had Hik'te and Coira there with him. Frankly, he wondered exactly why this particular group of younglings had been chosen to come before the Council. Master Kleon, who had escorted them there, stood by the wall in the back where Obi-wan had stood every single time Anakin had been brought before the council in his previous life. At least this time he wasn't the only one under the Council's scrutiny.

The younglings, being Jedi younglings, were already disciplined enough to have been almost completely silent as they'd come into the circular room and lined up in an orderly fashion that would have had most military groups drilling for days. Anakin should know, he'd made sure his own troops had drilled often enough.

After a few seconds of silence, Mace Windu spoke up. Anakin did note that he didn't have his usual angry grimace on his face. Instead he seemed almost...neutral. Undoubtedly he was trying not to scare the kids too badly. It was definitely a positive improvement as far as Anakin was concerned.

"We have called you here today because of a request that was made of us recently. Each of you will be given an opportunity to, in random pairs, become a temporary junior liaison to the Senate."

Anakin felt an unpleasant tingle in his stomach, not liking where this was going.

"Chancellor Palpatine has asked that the Jedi be more involved in the Senate. He feels the Order has become too distanced from the galaxy we serve. In an effort to remedy this, he has asked that we choose a group of Padawans and Initiates that will be serving as aids to various representatives in the Senate. You have all been selected as part of this endeavor."

The unpleasant tingle suddenly became a roaring maelstrom and Anakin felt his breath catch in his throat. It was all he could do to shield it from the Jedi surrounding him and he almost didn't hear Mace continue.

"As such, you are encouraged to speak to people in the Senate and create connections as you see fit, as long as the boundaries of such connections remains within the Jedi Code and the law. Most of you

will not be leaving the confines of the Temple due to either your chosen focus of study or your initiate status, however if you do end up leaving on a mission of any kind, you will be temporarily dismissed from your duties until the mission is accomplished and an appropriate waiting period has passed.

"The Council had decided that a maximum of six hours per day, two days per week will be what is required of you. Each of you are ahead in some aspect of your classes, which is why you have been chosen for this experiment. The program will last for one year and will include two different groups of senators and perhaps the Chancellor himself. Each pair will help their assigned senator for one month before being assigned to a different partner and a different senator.

"Do you have any questions?"

After a few moments of silence, most of the younglings shook their heads.

"Then you are dismissed."

The younglings all bowed and turned to shuffle neatly out of the room. Anakin barely kept himself moving forward as he thought through the implications of this turn of events. Palpatine hadn't done this before, why would he now? Encouraging the Jedi to make connections and establish relationships with the Galaxy at large went against his ultimate goal of destroying them.

Anakin frowned. Actually, the answer was fairly obvious once he thought about it. The former Sith Lord had noticed that with one or two exceptions (namely Ferus and Darra), most of the initiates would never be taken as a Padawan. They would be sent out to the Jedi Service Corps and would be ripe for the picking by a fairly desperate Sith Lord looking for a new apprentice. The exceptions and Padawans had been thrown in to remove suspicion or stop anyone from realizing something was up, but the move had 'Darth Sidious' written all over it to someone who knew the man well.

What was the Council thinking? Okay, he knew that one as well. Sidious could be *extremely* persuasive. He guessed that a little under half of the Council didn't approve of this decision to send children into the Rancor-den that was Galactic Politics, but Anakin could see where something like this could be useful in educating the Jedi children by experience as to how people—especially selfish, powerful people—would treat them. It could wake up a great many Padawans and

Initiates long before they had to learn those lessons the hard way.

But Anakin was not ready to face Palpatine again, especially not on a regular basis. He had to get out of this somehow because there was no way in this life or the next that he would go over there. It was too much of a potential disaster for both his plans and the Galaxy's safety. But then, what could he do? And he strongly suspected that the Council would be unhappy when he told them he didn't want to be a part of the endeavor. How far was he willing to go, though? If it came down to a question of going to the Senate Building (thus potentially running into/interacting with Palpatine) and leaving the Jedi Order, which one would he pick? He'd prefer to not have to choose as either decision had far too many unknown variables to consider. But if he had to, which would be better?

"Anakin," Hik'te's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Yes?" he asked focusing on the blue-skinned boy walking beside him.

"What do you think?"

"About what?"

His friend rolled his eyes with a put-upon expression. "About us being chosen like this!"

"It must mean good things, right?" Coira asked with a grin. "I mean, it means that the Council thinks highly of us, and these are good training missions for when we're Padawans!"

Anakin felt his lips thin ever so slightly, but he couldn't tear their hope down. Besides, telling them that they probably would never *be* Padawans would raise too many questions he couldn't answer, so he forced a smile and grinned over at the girl.

"Yeah, definitely," he said.

He caught the barest flash of uncertainty from her before her blinding smile came back. Then she glanced over at Hik'te. "Who do you think they'll assign us to?"

Anakin let Hik'te and Coira converse while he wracked his brain, trying to come up with something that would get him out of this situation.

He finally came to the conclusion that he would simply have to speak

to a Master in the Council and insist that he be taken off the roster...well, he'd probably have to play it differently than a simple demand, but he would have to try it. His biggest problem, though, would be the fact that no initiate could simply walk up to a Master or even a Knight without going into areas that were restricted. He'd prefer to speak of this matter with one of the Council members and try to avoid having his reluctance spread throughout the Temple (not that too many people would be horribly interested in him as an initiate, but still).

Well, if worse came to worst, he could speak to his clan leader or to whoever would be overseeing the initiates' project, but perhaps he could speak with Yoda or Yaddle before that. He'd definitely prefer to deal with one of them than most of the other Council Members.

Chapter End Notes

> Thanks to Batfan7 for her amazing help in this! I know I haven't gotten around to answering everyone's replies, but because my last chapter was late, I decided to give this one a little early. Hope you all like it.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin's favorite room in the Jedi Temple the first time around had been the Room of a Thousand Fountains. That was no different this time, but his second favorite room (at least to anyone watching him closely enough) this time around would have to be the black training room, an area specifically designed for training in complete darkness. Most initiates couldn't even get into the place without at least a Knight's permission, but most initiates weren't Anakin Skywalker.

Visiting the room on nights when, for one reason or another, he couldn't sleep was becoming a bit of a habit as of late. He still made it a point to get as much sleep as he could, but between everything that had happened in the last few weeks and his stupid dreams (which he knew were visions but he could not for the life of him remember them!), he was finding more and more that he needed to 'vent'.

Fortunately, it wasn't too difficult for him to sneak in, find an extra saber that roughly matched those he'd built himself (as both a Sith and a Jedi) and simply take his ever growing frustration out on the training droids. He had to say that his lightsaber skills had come quite a long way since the start of his little trip to the past.

A twinge in the Force had him dodging and rolling in the darkness, avoiding a good deal of the littered debris and the droid's blaster shots —the only light in the room besides his lightsaber—at the same time. He felt the Force flow through him, surrounding him and saturating everything—the very molecules of the different materials that made up the room. He knew instinctively how each of the various substances reacted to whatever physical forces he used on them. He knew where to step to avoid sharp edges and otherwise dangerous areas, he knew how high he could jump at any given point in the room before he hit something overhead. His footsteps were sure and confident every time. He belonged here.

Another warning through the Force and he used one hand to spring off of the floor and onto a large piece of duroplast, knowing exactly when to stop and when to push for just the right amount of height. He dodged between two droids and they fell to the ground in smoking heaps. He was grateful that the droids, while nowhere nearly as

advanced as those he had commissioned as Vader, were a challenge. And, even better, they would not be missed. The cleaning droids would sweep through the room when Anakin had finished, scavenging what they could from what was left of the destroyed machines to make more such droids and melting down whatever was left to send off to a factory that the Jedi had a contract with. They would send in new droids at cost while the Jedi would send them the scrap left over. It had, apparently, saved the Temple quite a bit of money, but more importantly, it had made it so Anakin could use the room practically undetected.

Anakin sliced another three of the hovering robots in half with two swings and deflected a large group of blaster bolts. His muscles shook and ached, but Anakin pushed on. He needed to get better, stronger, faster, more flexible...and he needed to do so yesterday. He was getting more and more used to his much smaller body and felt that he could definitely hold his own against most Jedi in the order, especially with the few Ataru moves he'd incorporated into both of the form V styles he used, switching back and forth between the two as the situation called for it. He was actually rather proud of his evolved style.

He dodged again, moving his body so that he could use the momentum to spring forward and towards the training droid he knew would be off to his right. A satisfying slash and clattering of parts as they fell to the floor echoed throughout the room but Anakin didn't bother to pause, instead turning and blocking another dozen or so bolts. Already he could tell there weren't nearly as many coming his way as there had been not minutes before. Good. He'd taken out most of the droids he'd activated. Another five or ten minutes and he'd be done with them. He wouldn't allow himself to stop before then, no matter what his leg muscles wanted him to do. Pushing oneself to the breaking point was how one honed battle reflexes and how one built muscle. He knew he would be paying for this tomorrow, but that was of little consequence. That pain was a good, wholesome pain that only seemed like a drop in the ocean compared to the full-body stinging sensations that would shoot through him every time he so much as moved as Vader.

Eight minutes later he stood frozen in the center of the room, blade poised behind him in a finishing stance that he could move from quickly if necessary, but he heard nothing and felt nothing in the Force. After a moment he straightened and deactivated his lighsaber, then called for lights. The room lit up at his command, dimly at first and then brightening gradually, designed to allow a user's eyes to

adjust without pain. Droid parts littered the room and he couldn't help the smile that came to his lips. He may want to simply collapse at the moment, but he'd successfully doubled the amount of droids he could handle since the end of the previous month. He wasn't as strong as he needed to be yet, but seeing such significant, measurable progress helped to alleviate some of his fear and made the waiting bearable.

With a satisfied sigh, he switched the lightsaber off and put it back in the storage. He locked the door and began to make his way back to his room. Tomorrow was a racing night and the day after would be a session with Girth. He took out his com unit and opened the holographic calendar feature. He also had a full day the next morning. It was a B schedule, which meant his Force Techniques class again. He had yet to hear from any Masters that would continue to help him with said class (and half of him still didn't want to acknowledge that he *needed* help), but he hoped someone would contact him soon. At the very least he could talk to them about getting out of that stupid, glorified 'errand boy to the Senators' ridiculousness.

He avoided most of the nocturnal Jedi wondering around the halls but wasn't too worried about running into anyone as he would just tell them the truth: he couldn't sleep and went to work out a bit to tire himself out. He wasn't really looking to go out of his way to avoid anyone, and so when he turned a corner and saw a familiar figure leaving the main cafeteria, he couldn't help but wonder just what the Force was trying to say when it kept having them meet up like this.

Right about then, the figure turned and saw Anakin. Then, to Anakin's utter shock, the man *smiled* and he had to reconsider as to whether it really was Obi-wan he'd run into. The expression wasn't a forced smile or the 'I'm just humoring you' smile or the sardonic smile that Anakin saw most often, no it was an honestly genuine smile.

"Anakin," the man said, then glanced at his chrono. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed?"

Turning around and backtracking now would cause more problems than it was worth so, with a suppressed sigh, Anakin walked up to him and shrugged.

"I couldn't sleep."

Obi-wan raised an eyebrow and looked Anakin up and down. "You look like you're about ready to fall down on your feet." Anakin immediately relaxed. *That* was the Obi-wan Anakin knew.

"I worked out in the practice rooms for a little while."

The older Jedi nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, a good workout always helps me sleep too." He paused and Anakin knew the older Jedi was debating as to whether he should ask or suggest something or not. Knowing Obi-wan, he'd eventually just get to a point where he'd figure whatever it was wasn't any of his business and just be on his way.

But the Jedi surprised him. "Something else that helps me sleep is a glass of warm milk. Come on."

Anakin stared after Obi-wan, who turned and walked back into the cafeteria he'd only just vacated as the boy tried to process what had just happened. Obi-wan had always been a 'leave well enough alone' kind of person. It had actually been something that had driven Anakin up the wall more than once as the former Sith had always been a 'go get 'em' kind of person. Obi-wan rarely went out of his way to do something when he thought it was unnecessary (although his definition of 'necessary' varied). He must be in a *really* good mood.

It was a combination of morbid curiosity and surprise that had him following the man into the cafeteria. Obi-wan reached a small, well-used table and gestured for Anakin to have a seat. Anakin did. Then he wondered why he was doing this. He stared at the old but clean table top in front of him as memories flooded his mind. He remembered Obi-wan bringing him down here as a padawan for the exact same reason. It hadn't happened often, but Anakin had treasured the experiences. Well, he had before Mustafar. He even remembered doing the same thing with Ahsoka when they'd been at the Jedi Temple before he learned that she had a slight intolerance to milk. Then they'd switched to a Chandrilan cider.

He really should just leave before he awoke other memories that really should just remain buried. He'd just made up his mind to go when Obi-wan sat a tray with two large mugs of steaming milk that, from what Anakin could smell, had the a lovely blend of spices mixed in and a dab of sweet cream on top.

"Here we are," Obi-wan said with an encouraging smile as he took the seat across from Anakin and grabbed his own mug. He took a swig and let out a contented breath before he noticed that Anakin hadn't touched his mug.

"What's wrong?" the older Jedi asked. Anakin didn't trust himself to answer. Obi-wan regarded him for a few moments before glancing

around and a sudden light came to his eyes. "It's the cafeteria isn't it. You're not used to eating in here, right? Because you're an initiate." The smile softened even more, taking on a gentle hue that Anakin did *not* want to see right now. "Don't worry. As you are here with me, it is allowed. Truthfully, I don't think you would be kicked out either way."

Definitely Obi-wan. Anakin decided that it would just be better to drink the dang mug, if only to get his former master off of his back faster. He grabbed it and took a sip. That was when the specific memories really came back. Obi-wan discussing this or that about the Jedi Order and what would be expected of him as a padawan, explaining why milk on other worlds was not blue, even just mentioning an electronic game that was popular and that Anakin may want to try picking up if he was looking for something to help take his mind off of every-day, stressful things.

It became rather difficult to not simply drop the mug right then and there and run. He just sat there with his hands clenched tightly around the glass as he stared blankly ahead. The worst part about it all was the fact that it really did taste so good and...he'd *missed* this.

Obi-wan must have noted his discomfort because he put his drink down and studied Anakin, concerned. "What's wrong? Are you allergic to milk? Do you not like the flavor? I can have them fix you something else if you would like." Stang, Obi-wan could *talk* when he wasn't brooding or trying to be a perfect Jedi Master in front of his Padawan.

"I'm fine," Anakin said shortly. "And...it tastes good." It really did.

The older Jedi looked rather relieved for a moment before he leaned his head on his hand and examined Anakin again. "You're not going to tell me what's wrong, are you."

Anakin shrugged and looked down at his milk, not wanting to meet Obi-wan's eyes.

"You should tell someone, you know."

Anakin wanted to snort. Who could he possibly talk to about everything? Only Siri knew and he was going to avoid her for as long as he dared (which meant he had another few days at most, unfortunately, because he really *did* have to talk to her). Even when he eventually went to see her, he doubted he could really tell her anything. She hated him too much and he trusted her only marginally more than he trusted the other Jedi.

And wasn't that a bit hypocritical of Obi-wan anyway? Mister 'I make an art of releasing every emotion I've ever felt to the Force and wouldn't dream of burdening anyone else with my problems'.

They sat there in silence for a few more moments before the Knight, in classic, Obi-wan fashion, decided that he'd pried enough and changed the subject.

"I'm glad I ran into you, actually," the older Jedi said after taking another long but still polite gulp of his drink. "I have to thank you."

Anakin frowned up at his former Master. "For what?"

Obi-wan's smile held a warm but wistful touch to it this time. It was amazing how many different smiles the man had. Anakin had a hard time classifying them as Obi-wan hadn't used them a lot while in the previous timeline.

"While I was on my last mission I had to make a choice and your words helped me to make the right one. It was simple for you to say, I know, but you told me just what I needed to hear and I appreciate it."

Anakin was staring at Obi-wan openly now. Obi-wan rarely thanked Anakin, and when he did it was usually a fast 'thanks for saving my butt' kind of thing (except more polite) and then they'd argue about how much he'd really needed Anakin's help afterward. Anakin looked harder at Obi-wan, noting the differences and changes that had happened in the other's life without him having Anakin as a Padawan.

He seemed happier and more content now than he ever had in Anakin's previous life. It kind of hurt to see just how badly he'd screwed up the life of someone he had once cared for even before he'd turned. Still, Obi-wan had said that Anakin's admonishment (probably his statement that the Knight should think more carefully about his own life) had helped him and...that was something he could draw some peace from.

"You're welcome," he said, surprised to hear that he meant it.

Obi-wan smiled and took another sip of his drink.

"Oh," he said as he put the mug down again. "I have some good news. Remember Siri Tachi?"

Anakin stiffened involuntarily. He *really* needed to work on his control again. Why had it slipped so much anyway? He was proud that his

voice came out steady though.

"The Jedi you introduce me to? The one in the coma?"

Obi-wan's bright smile lit up his face. "Yes, her. She decided to join the land of the living again."

Anakin couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Obi-wan's choice of words. "You mean, she woke up?" he asked, surprised that he was still an expert in translating 'Obi-wan speak' into basic.

"Indeed," Obi-wan said. "She's had a rather difficult time of it, but the healers are hopeful that she'll make a full recovery."

The former Sith frowned. "You mean it's not certain?"

Obi-wan's smile dimmed a bit. "No. They still don't know why she fell into a coma in the first place, and apparently it's wreaked havoc with her neural systems. She will have to relearn a lot, and she had some rather...troubling dreams, but she's recovering quickly." He suddenly turned and smiled at Anakin again. "I would like to introduce you some time, while she is awake, I mean."

Anakin felt his mouth go dry. "I'd like that," he forced himself to say with a smile.

"How about tomorrow after your classes?" Obi-wan asked.

Anakin hid a grimace. "I have a previous appointment.

To his credit, Obi-wan didn't look disappointed or dissuaded in the slightest. "If you cannot come after your appointment tomorrow, perhaps the day after? I expect to be sent on a mission fairly quickly so it will have to be rather soon."

"I will...see what I can do," Anakin said evasively.

Obi-wan nodded and put his empty glass down on the tray. "I look forward to it." He glanced at Anakin's drink with a slight frown. He hadn't consumed even a fourth of it. With an inward sigh, the Initate upended the glass and gulped the still-warm liquid down. It really would have been a lovely drink if it hadn't had so many memories attached to it.

When he finished with a loud gasp, Obi-wan was staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" Anakin asked.

"You didn't have to do that, you know. If you don't like it, you aren't required to drink it."

Anakin looked down. "I...like it. It's just, someone I used to know would give me something similar at times."

"Ah," Obi-wan said. "I see. Well I do hope it helped, but know that we can find alternatives if you so like in the future."

As far as Anakin was concerned, they weren't going to do anything like this in the future. He still nodded and forced a smile.

"Thank you, Obi-wan."

The older Jedi smiled as he stood. "You should probably get to bed now."

Anakin nodded and rose himself, reaching for the tray to go and put it in the discard window where the droids would then pick it up and clean it. Before he could, though, Obi-wan grabbed it with a smile.

"Allow me, young one. You go. I will see you again shortly."

That was strange. Obi-wan had always asked Anakin to take the tray away. He didn't know what had brought on this small change but he wasn't about to complain.

"Thank you," he said again for good measure before turning and hurrying out of the cafeteria as quickly as he could without looking as if he were fleeing.

Despite the harrying encounter, his and Obi-wan's efforts paid off as he fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

xXx

The next evening

Anakin had decided to participate in one more race for the night. There would probably be three or four more that night but he needed his rest...and he had to tell himself that over and over again because there would be some rather large pots later that night (which would, in turn, mean a higher reward for winning). It would be a substantial increase to his still far too limited funds, but he would be having his second major session with Girth the next day and...well, something

told him he would need to be ready.

Shaking the thought from his head, he sighed and checked his web-mail again...as he'd done at least a dozen times in the last fifteen minutes. Gah! He hated the downtime between races. He especially hated that no one was allowed near the speeders between races for fear of sabotage or he'd be doing what he could to boost the maneuverability on the vehicle he'd been given for the evening. At least they let each racer check over his own engine and systems before they raced.

No new messages. He shook his head and checked over the already read messages he'd received. Fortunately, he'd gotten a response from a few of the mercenaries he'd contacted earlier, but had long-since decided that none of those who had returned his missive would be right for the job. He needed someone he could trust to get things done *right*...and he knew who he wanted. Anakin frowned. He'd always been a perfectionist and hated settling. Of course, that had probably been part of his problem right there, but still, this had to be done and it had to be done well.

A shadow looming over him distracted him from his thoughts and he shut off the holo-com to look up at Bleersh.

"You've been losing on purpose."

Anakin repressed a sigh and stood up. He'd been expecting this for a while. "Yes."

"Why?"

The Jedi looked the jelly-like being in the eyes firmly. "I was followed and attacked a few weeks ago." Bleersh frowned. He'd apparently been expecting that, but he obviously still wanted more information, so Anakin went on. "I didn't want to attract as much attention."

The handler's frown deepened. "Then let me arrange an escort for you."

Anakin shook his head. "You can't."

"Why? Because you're a Jedi?"

Silence fell over them as Anakin's eyes narrowed. He could sense that the being wasn't a hundred percent positive, but still felt very sure about Anakin's identity. "How did you know that?" he asked finally,

deciding to confirm it and see what the broker thought.

Bleersh rubbed one slimy hand over his gelatinous face. "So it's true. I thought so."

"Does it complicate things?" Anakin asked carefully. "Am I not allowed to race now?"

Bleersh shrugged (a disturbing action in his species because it sent a rather unattractive ripple throughout his body) and shook his head. "There are no rules saying you can't compete if you're a Jedi. I still think we should keep it on the DL, though."

Anakin couldn't agree more but he didn't confirm or deny the request, sensing that his handler had a bit more to say. He eyed Anakin thoughtfully, looking only marginally troubled.

"What is a Jedi doing down here anyway?"

Anakin felt a tug at the corner of his mouth. "I am an Initiate and was brought to the Temple later than most. Since there is no guarantee that I will become a Padawan, I decided I should plan for my future."

Bleersh regarded Anakin for several seconds before he spoke. "Not every youngling becomes a Jedi?"

Anakin shook his head. "No." Except during war times.

"Then where do they go?" Bleersh asked.

"Have you heard of the Jedi Service Corps?"

"Yes."

"Most of the Jedi who work there were once younglings not accepted by a Master for training, for whatever reason," Anakin said with a shrug. It actually had made tracking down Jedi and other Force-sensitives much easier for Vader after order 66. He wanted to do something about that...

"And you feel this may happen to you?" Bleersh asked.

No. He was positive the Council wouldn't let him go off unsupervised by at least a Knight. Still, Bleersh didn't need to know that.

"As I said, I was brought in late," Anakin said with another shrug.

At this, Bleersh raised the blob on his face that passed for his species' equivalent of an eyebrow. "And you decided that illegal racing twice a week would be the best way to earn your...nest egg?"

Again, Anakin shrugged. "It's how the Jedi found me. I've been racing since I was old enough to steer."

"You are good at it," Bleersh conceded with a nod of his bulbous head. Neither one spoke for a few minutes, each contemplating their conversation and the situation.

"I'm curious," the young Jedi said as he sat up and fixed his manager with a strong gaze. "What made you think I was a Jedi?"

The being scoffed. "Please. We're just a few clicks away from the Jedi Temple and no human, let alone a kid your age, could race like that without something helpin' you out. It took me a while to put it together, and I'm sure I'm not the only one, but no one has any proof, so you're fine. I'll help mislead them even."

"I see," Anakin said, wondering if he had been that transparent the first time around. Probably more so. Another contemplative silence fell over the pair.

Finally the broker waved a large hand. "Very well, do as you will. It keeps the odds up anyway, but just realize that you're not the only one with stakes in all of this."

"Right," Anakin said with a dry nod.

"Race starts in five minutes. You'd better get your speeder to the starting point."

Anakin couldn't help a small grin as he nodded in acknowledgment and hurried away.

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Leaving the races that night was not easy for him to make himself do, but if his time as Vader had taught him one thing, it was self discipline...or at least, the ability to follow the rules he set for himself. Setting a goal and keeping his sights on that goal had been something that he had only begun to learn when the Clone Wars ended. Other things had always seemed to want to distract him as a General and as a Jedi. He'd taken it to the other extreme as Vader in an attempt to forget his past as Anakin Skywalker.

Still, he had added a fair amount of credits to his personal fund and even though he found himself crawling through vents (again), and despite the fact that he really wished he could have stayed for that final cup, he was still at least fairly satisfied with the evening's progress.

He'd almost reached the point where he would reenter the Jedi Temple when his com unit went off. It sounded loudly in the relative silence of his surroundings, almost causing him to flinch. Almost. After a moment of internal debate, he decided to pause for a moment and check the message. It had been a notification of his web-mail and it wouldn't take more than a second.

The holoscreen that came up blurred around the edges and it looked a little fuzzy, probably due to his location in the bowels of Courscant. It was a wonder he got any signal at all. There was probably an advertising campaign to be had in that.

His gaze went to the top of the holographic screen and instantly found the new message. When he saw who it was from, his eyes widened in surprise for a moment before he smirked. The missive had no subject and only one word in it: "meet" followed by a time and a place. The coordinates were on Courscant, as per his previous request.

Anakin couldn't help the slightly conspiring grin as he shut down the holo-web connection and continued climbing towards the Temple. He had the answer he wanted. Now he just had to make sure he could survive the encounter.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, I blocked my first user today on ff.net. I'm kind of happy that it took me a good 10 years of writing or so before I stumbled across someone who just wanted to flame and not be constructive in the slightest (they told me that my Hindsight Story was just copying the first Star Wars movie and that I was the worst writer on fanfiction. *snicker* Obviously they didn't read the story and compare it to 85 % of the other fan fics out there...either that or they've just stumbled across the REALLY good ones that make my stories look pathetic...how did they do that? I'd like a list of stories like that!). Anyway, I just want to say thanks to everyone reviewing it so far. You guys are either very encouraging or very constructive and I really appreciate it. :hug: You guys are the best!

Now for the bad news: I left my computer charger at my grandfathers (it fell out! I don't even know HOW it fell out) so my roommate is being AWESOME and letting me use her Toshiba charger. Wouldn't be such a problem if my battery held more than 15 minutes worth of power. *sigh* Anyway, so replies and updates will be slow until I can get that charger back. Sorry.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The snacks Girth had brought this time around were frosted cookies with adorable little faces representing different races decorating them. Anakin couldn't help but look at them with mild disapproval. Why would anyone waste such time on frivolous, pointless embellishments? Still, they tasted good, and because Anakin hadn't finished the Tatooinian drinks from last time (apparently Girth had used a stasis unit of some sort because the beverage seemed as fresh as ever) they had bantha milk with Courscanti treats. It was an amusingly different combination and Anakin found the cultural contrast offsetting his initial distaste.

"So, Anakin," Girth said with a smile. "Last time we went through how you go about acknowledging your feelings. I'd like to continue on that path today if you don't mind. So I'm going to say a word or a phrase and it will have to do with either your every-day life or something common in the news and I want you to tell me, truthfully and accurately, how you feel about whatever subject I say. Is that alright?"

Anakin twitched uneasily but nodded. This sounded like it was going to be uncomfortable.

"Alright, how do you feel about your bed?"

Anakin blinked for a few seconds. "My...bed?"

Girth nodded. "Yes. The one you have here in the Temple."

"Oh," the former Sith said, wondering what on Courscant this had to do with mind-healing. Still, he didn't have any reason to not answer something so simple. Perhaps Girth was simply establishing a 'safe' subject to begin with.

"It is nice." Girth raised an eyebrow when Anakin didn't answer further. Anakin wanted to roll his eyes, but refrained. He got the message.

"It is comfortable and adequate and allows me to sleep."

"Alright. Is it soft or hard?"

Anakin thought. "Intermediate, leaning towards the hard side."

"And how would you feel if you didn't have that bed?"

He really wasn't understanding the question (or the line of questioning for that matter). "Then I would simply have another bed."

"And if you didn't? For whatever reason."

"I would sleep where I could."

"Is that what you used to do on Tatooine?" Ah, he was establishing more background information. That made some sense. It was a very round-about way of asking though. He wondered why the mind-healer hadn't come outright and just asked.

"No, I had my own bed on Tatooine. It was, most often, filled with sand, but it served its purpose, and I used it exclusively." Girth most assuredly caught that Anakin never said the bed belonged to him, but he also undoubtedly realized that it hadn't been a huge problem. Anakin had hated not owning his own things, but he'd lived in relative comfort for a slave. If he had wanted for anything, he'd simply scrounge around until he found something that would make do. It hadn't been his biggest problem with his life before the Jedi, just one of many unpleasant results of the situation he was born into.

"Alright, but how do you feel about your bed now?"

The pointlessness was starting to annoy him, but he thought honestly about the question nonetheless.

"I suppose I like it," he said a little uncertainly. He didn't feel particularly strongly towards the bed, but it was comfortable and supported his body as it needed to.

"You suppose?"

Anakin frowned. "Very well, I do rather like it."

"Very good," Girth said with a smile. "I'll move on. You mentioned sand. How do you feel about that?"

If Anakin had been the age he looked, he would have made a face. As it was, his frown turned into a very mild scowl of distaste. "There is little good about sand. It is a vile substance that is annoying at best, deadly at worst."

The drall furrowed his brow slightly, whiskers twitching in puzzlement. "Deadly?"

Anakin allowed himself a small, grim smile. "I assume you have never lived on a desert planet." Girth shook his head in confirmation. "A single grain of sand weighs almost nothing and is easily swept along by a strong enough wind. However, sand is rough and relatively hard and if tossed about with enough strength, it can easily take off a skin cell or two. Imagine being caught in a sand storm with millions of grains in the air. I doubt you can comprehend the pain of a death consisting of having your skin peeled off your bones a few cells at a time."

The puzzlement faded, but Girth's whiskers seemed to twitch faster and his troubled expression did not leave his face.

"Was this a threat you often faced? A punishment perhaps?"

"Not personally." Anakin had been lucky in that regard. "But it was not uncommon for a slave owner to leave a servant in a storm for a certain amount of time as punishment."

"And how did you feel when you heard of such occurrences?"

For the first time that session, Anakin found it difficult to answer. He'd been expecting something like this, but it still seemed to be just as difficult as ever to analyze and accurately communicate his feelings. He wondered if that was a personal failing or his Jedi background coming into play.

"People I knew would be tortured and left in pain for the smallest of slights. How should I have felt?"

"Ah," Girth held up one stubby finger and claw, "but that wasn't the question. How you are 'supposed' to feel varies with the society you live in. That is not the focus of this session. How you actually feel is what we are trying to ascertain.

"You see, Anakin, honesty—especially with yourself—is the beginning of the process of understanding, which (as I said before) can eventually lead to peace and happiness. Honesty is the first step to healing, because you have to acknowledge that there is a problem to mend. Healing helps you gain peace of mind. If you don't acknowledge a problem exists, how can you ever fix it?"

The drall smiled and went on as Anakin listened warily. "The problem

with honesty is that it can be very painful. This is getting caught up in the 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts' again because people are ashamed if they don't conform to what they think they should be feeling or what they think other people want them to conform to. Now sometimes conforming can be good and healthy. Often, though, it is harmful and drives people to hide what they feel and feign that it doesn't exist in order to pretend that they are everything they think they should be.

"Does that make sense, Anakin?"

Anakin thought about it for a moment. Yes, he could see the logic in that. He could even come up with hundreds of examples and saw such tendencies in himself to an extent.

"Yes," he said after a short silence.

Apparently that was all Girth needed to continue. "Now, a lot of people are ashamed of what they feel, for whatever reason. That is what I would like to help you work past. Once you can acknowledge something honestly, you can then consciously decide whether that is an obstacle you wish to overcome, or a trait you would like to keep.

"So," Girth smiled broadly, although he didn't show his teeth this time, "with that in mind, please tell me honestly how you felt when you heard of the way other slaves were treated. I promise you that whatever it was that you felt, I will not judge you."

Anakin seriously doubted that. No single person could really be that unbiased. However, he did appreciate the thought and he could see the truth in the mind-healer's words. So, even though he found it uncomfortable, he thought back to those times in his life and tried to analyze what he remembered feeling.

"I felt bad for them," he said, unaware that his words had suddenly become much simpler. "I hated seeing them hurt like that, and it...s-scared me." *That* had been difficult to say. "I didn't want that to happen to me or mom. I also...f-felt grateful that we had never been punished like that." And didn't that sound awful? 'Glad it's them and not us' was not the mentality of a Jedi. Perhaps he really had just been a Sith waiting to happen from day one.

"You sound ashamed of that. Why?"

Anakin glanced up to see a genuinely curious expression on the fur-covered face across from him. "I shouldn't find relief from other people's pain," he said feeling his cheeks heat up. Since when had he

had such problems with control?

To his surprise, Girth smiled. "Ah, there are the 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts' again. In this case, I do think you are correct that feeling happy because of others' pain is not a desirable trait. However, you didn't take joy from their pain so much as you took relief from your lack of pain. If you could have stopped their torture, would you have tried?"

Anakin didn't hesitate, although his answer was a little dry. "Yes." The irony. As a youngling, he had wanted little more than to stop others' pain. As an adult he had always only caused it.

Girth's smile became more gentle but seemed so much more supportive at the same time. "Then, with that in mind, can you honestly say you took pleasure from their suffering? What you felt is absolutely normal and nothing to be ashamed of. I would even go so far as to call it a good trait because you could acknowledge another's suffering and at least sympathize if not empathize with them. That, my boy, is the mark of a good person."

The variations were there. They were nuances, but for the first time in his life, Anakin could see them and he could understand the enormous difference they made. He'd always felt guilty when it had come to other slaves and their suffering, and as such, he had never consciously realized before that feeling relief in that kind of a situation was alright. More importantly, if what Girth said was true, his guilt and relief didn't make him naturally dark, but simply *human.* It made sense logically, and wouldn't he have thought the same of any slave he had come across as Anakin Skywalker (and maybe even as Darth Vader). Wasn't the idea of expecting something different of himself simply holding himself to a double standard of sorts?

The realization seemed to click in his head, and he suddenly felt a sense of hope bubble up from under the layers of disparaging blackness that had stifled his soul for so long; a hope that maybe he really could succeed in overcoming the darkness. And on top of it all, if he decided, he could work on eradicating the guilt, purging it from his system now that he knew of it and realized just how he actually *didn't* deserve it (and wasn't that a novel concept?). He still wasn't convinced he could (or should) rid himself of every emotion, but this was a good place to start.

"Now," Girth said, drawing Anakin from his thoughts. "Let's return to the exercise: How do you feel about cleaning droids?"

For the rest of the session, they went through various objects and how Anakin felt about them. Some of them were very simple (the clothes he wore, mechanics, etc.) others a bit more complex (food—he had a time explaining that without letting anything slip—his fellow initiates and the recent election).

Fortunately, if Anakin said he didn't want to talk about anything, Girth would drop the subject and move on. By the time they reached the end of the session, Anakin was sure that he'd become an expert at examining his emotions in relation to just about anything...which had probably been the mind-healer's goal all along, now that he thought about it.

"Well done, Anakin," Girth said finally, a large smile gracing his face as he glanced at the clock. "Well, it looks like our session is about done. I'm actually going to give you an assignment due at our next session. I'd like you to write an essay on the Jedi Temple for me. You don't have to give me any details you're not comfortable with sharing, I'm mainly looking for how you feel about it. I would like it to be at least a page long, but any length will be acceptable as long as I can tell that you put some thought and effort into it.

"Now I will say that I was going to give you two assignments, but there has been a slight change of plans."

"Oh?" Anakin asked warily.

"Yes," Girth said, his smile turning apologetic. "Something has come up with my family next week, so Master Xio and I have traded days, so to speak. You will be seeing me again in five days*, when you would normally see Master Xio, and you will see her during our normal time. Is this acceptable to you?"

Anakin wanted to ask what had come up, wanted to make sure nothing was out of the ordinary (it was an old habit that had only gotten worse during his stint as Vader). Still, he couldn't very well pry for no reason, and really, it wasn't any of his business.

"Of course, Healer," he said with a respectful nod.

The drall chuckled. "Anakin, I told you, just call me Girth."

Anakin couldn't help but smile. "Very well, Girth."

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If anyone in the universe understood that no one could ever truly understand the universe to its fullest extent, it would be Girth the Drall. He had come across more surprising happenings that didn't make sense in the slightest than most people could dream about in his tenure as a mind-healer. Truthfully, it was part of what he liked about his job. It was a challenge and no matter how similar the symptoms, every person he met with had different needs and required different treatments. He'd known the moment he'd heard the Jedi's request that this would be one of those extremely abnormal cases, if only because of the Jedi involvement. After all, how often did a slave child get freed only to be recruited as a protector of the Galaxy?

Then there was the fact that Anakin did not fit even in Girth's adapted preconceptions. To say that the boy went beyond his most extreme expectations was like calling a super-nova harmful. The boy was almost nothing like he'd expected. He'd originally pictured a broken child adjusting to a very new, very different lifestyle. What he got was a broken adult shoved into a child's body trying to adapt to a what he perceived as a different but still oppressive lifestyle—a lifestyle he obviously wanted to reject but, for whatever reason, wouldn't.

Truthfully, Girth found it mind-blowing as to just how unusual his new patient was. Anakin's reasoning skills were exceptional for almost any age, let alone a ten-year-old human. His comprehension of not only words but thought-processes, theories and ideas blew his mind and the boy's knowledge of certain subjects went beyond mastery level. If he didn't know any better, Girth would swear that Anakin Skywalker *was* an adult in most aspects...except for those few instances in which he wasn't. But even most of those could be accounted for in a traumatized adult forced into a new society and expected to blend in. It seemed to go against the young Jedi's nature to act like a child.

Add to that the fact that the boy acted more like a black operations war veteran than a recovering slave (although he saw signs of that as well—which did nothing to help with the utter complexity of the case). The whole situation overwhelmed Girth and he couldn't help but be grateful that he had another mind-healer in this instance. Anakin Skywalker had to be the most confusing and puzzling human Girth had ever met...and he came from the Corellian system.

As the mind-healer watched his young patient leave from their second (extremely successful in his opinion) session, he couldn't help but wonder just what Anakin Skywalker was hiding, because he was not normal. Unfortunately, he could not come up with a single

explanation that fit. He'd seen children who had been forced to grow up too early, and this went way beyond that, even factoring in a genius level comprehension.

The boy was ready to change, though. Otherwise both of their efforts wouldn't have yielded this kind of a reaction. He could tell he'd helped the boy think. Time would only tell if that thinking would lead to acceptance and healing, but he felt (and hoped) they were on the right track. He was still wary about Anakin's progress though, because he'd seen patients respond just as well, if not better, who had reverted to their old ways—sometimes to an extreme. It always hurt to see that and he did not want Anakin to be the next failure. Well, he never wanted any of his patients to, but there was something different about his latest one...something grander; as if this boy really did have the universe resting on his shoulders somehow. He wasn't sure if it was the proximity to the Jedi or all of this strange talk of the Force that gave him his premonition, but he had a feeling that if Anakin failed to heal that the rest of the Galaxy would suffer.

Unfortunately, while he'd known that helping Anakin would not be easy from the beginning, he could now see just how many fears the boy held—abandonment, trust, love, the lack thereof...it was as if Anakin had somehow betrayed himself in the past regarding just about every one of his insecurities. He treated himself as if he were some sort of dangerous criminal he may not be able to control, and that went beyond worrying.

Still, he could only do the best he could and guide the boy forward one step at a time, and if those steps ended up being enormous strides, so much the better. He could hold out hope for this one, and he would do everything he could to help him.

Only after he'd examined that thought rather thoroughly did he realize that he'd already stopped looking at the whole case with a completely objective eye.

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"Initiate Skywalker!" an unfamiliar voice called out. Anakin turned (probably a little more quickly than was strictly necessary) and saw a padawan he had only ever met in passing walk up to him. She was a purple-skinned Twi-lek with large, green eyes that would be striking on anyone, let alone a Twi-lek. Even at her young age, Anakin could tell she would grow into a very stunning woman. He wondered why he'd never met her before because he was sure that he would

remember her (he doubted any man would forget her, even if he didn't look at any female besides Padme like that anymore).

"Yes?" he asked.

She raised an eyebrow. "I am Padawan Acria Hakyui, and I bring a message from Knight Kenobi."

Anakin wanted to groan. He should have known that Obi-wan wouldn't let him back out of this one.

"Yes, what is it...Padawan Hakyui?" He added the respectful address to the end of his question after feeling the curious annoyance through the Force. He was supposed to be respectful to anyone with a higher rank than himself, but he still found it difficult to be respectful to knights and masters, let alone Padawans.

She seemed satisfied with his answer as she nodded firmly and relayed her message. "He says if you are feeling up to it, he is going to the medical wing to visit his friend today, if you would like to join him."

And he had to repress a sigh at that. If any trait could be attributed to Obi-wan it was tenacity. If he knew Obi-wan, which he liked to think he still did to some extent at least, then he would probably get a similar invitation tomorrow or the day after and the next day, and so on. If he kept ducking out, it would make the older man wonder why and then Obi-wan would look into it and maybe uncover something he really shouldn't. It would really be in everyone's best interest if Anakin just went and got it over with.

"Very well," he said, bowing his head ever so slightly. "I will have to drop my bag off at my quarters first. Please inform him that I will come shortly."

The Padawan shot him a slightly puzzled look before shrugging. "Please don't keep him waiting," she said as she turned and hurried off down the hall. Anakin felt his fists clench. That brat of a Jedi dared to give him orders? It only took him a few seconds to calm down this time, though, for which he was immensely grateful. He'd never taken well to orders anyway, but sometimes he still found (to his shame) that his instinct was still to kill anyone weaker than him who annoyed him. Stupid Sith tendencies.

Shifting his bag on his shoulder, he turned and strode calmly back to his room.

Twenty minutes later he found himself approaching the healer's wing with growing trepidation. He kept it all firmly behind his shields, but he still was not looking forward to this. At all. Whatsoever. He didn't know how Siri would react to him, and he still had to touch base with her but knew he couldn't do so with Obi-wan in the room. He just couldn't see how this could be anything short of awkward at best, disastrous at worst.

Perhaps he could feign homework? No, he couldn't very well back out now, not without looking even more suspicious. Obi-wan and suspicious did not go well together. He always rooted out a problem if something didn't add up. Well, almost always.

Steeling himself, he walked stiffly through the door and into an empty reception area. He frowned. He'd been expecting Obi-wan to be waiting for him. Well, perhaps he'd already gone in to see Siri.

Nodding at the padawan behind the reception desk, he placed one wrist in his other hand behind his back and walked purposefully towards Siri's room. He reached it just as Bant came walking out of the door. She paused as soon as she saw him and bent down, smiling at him.

"Initiate Skywalker. I am glad to see you here. You can go right in. Obi-wan was expecting you."

"Thank you," Anakin said, forcing a smile and bowing respectfully. He didn't notice her curious glance follow him as he strode past her and into the room. Obi-wan sat on a chair besides the bed, smiling at Anakin as he approached. His hand rested on the bed besides Siri's and while they weren't touching, they did look suspiciously close.

Siri looked much better than the last time Anakin had seen her. Well, calmer at least. She didn't smile but only glared coldly at him as he approached. He could sense a touch of disgust from her through the Force and found it difficult to not simply roll his eyes in annoyed exasperation.

"Anakin!" Obi-wan said enthusiastically. "I'm glad you could join us. I would like to introduce you to a very good friend of mine. Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Padawan Siri Tachi. Siri, this is—"

"Your padawan," she said dryly.

Obi-wan looked a little taken aback, although Anakin wasn't sure if he'd been surprised by her tone or her words more. "No. I was only

just knighted, Siri. I wouldn't want to take a padawan for at least a year if not more. I am by no means ready to have an apprentice at this point. I'm afraid that would just be detrimental to any child I took as a Padawan as well as myself."

It was Siri's turn to look surprised. "Not your padawan...but then...the Temple accepted him? At his age?"

Obi-wan smirked. "Yes, we were a little surprised ourselves. Still, the Council ruled for him to stay and so I thought I would introduce him to some of my most trusted friends here." With that he turned his smile down to Anakin.

For a moment, Anakin could forget all of the past between them and could take the gesture for what it was. He smiled back gratefully. Then Obi-wan gestured for him to take a seat and turned back to Siri, leaving Anakin wondering what had just happened.

"Besides, I thought you could use all the company you can get," the Knight said. "Weren't you just complaining about being bored?"

"Having strangers I've never met before waltz into my room like they own the place is not what I had in mind." Anakin turned an unimpressed gaze on her. Was that really the best she could come up with? With Obi-wan in the room, probably.

Obi-wan frowned in puzzlement. "I thought you'd like to meet him. I'm afraid I didn't take your situation into account. My apologies." And he said it with sincerity, not a touch of sarcasm although Anakin could hear the traces of confusion and disappointment.

Siri must have heard it to, because her face softened. "No, it's alright, Obi-wan. I was just surprised. That's all."

Anakin wanted to snort but somehow held it in. Instead he figured that this would be a good time to up play his 'child' act.

"Obi-wan introduced me to you when you were sick and I wanted to meet you. I'm sorry if it's a bad time." He tried to look confused and worried when he looked up at Obi-wan and then back at Siri.

Obi-wan watched him for a few moments, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded and looked back at Siri, thus missing the pointed look boarding on a smirk that Anakin shot her. She scowled at him but got the message he was trying to send: *Play along.*

After that she sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what's come over me, Obi-wan. I'm sorry. I understand why you wanted to introduce us." With that she held out her hand to Anakin, although he could see it was strained. "Anakin, I'm Siri Tachi." That was about as good as they would get at the moment. Anakin wondered where her self control had gone. She used to be a fabulous actor who could take immense amounts of mental pressure and come out on top.

He forced a smile himself and took her hand, shaking it firmly. "*Anakin* Skywalker," he said, putting just the barest emphasis on his name to remind her that he'd aligned himself with the light again. Hopefully permanently. "Knight Kenobi has told me a lot about you."

"Oh really?" Siri asked, taking her hand back just a little too quickly and raising an accusing eyebrow at Obi-wan who put up his hands to placate her.

"Only that we are good friends and that you were in a coma."

At that she turned the expression onto Anakin, who shrugged. "And that we don't know why you were in a coma, and that he'd known you for a while, and that he didn't like seeing you look so lifeless like that."

Obi-wan turned to Anakin in surprise. "I don't remember telling you that."

Oh, right. He'd known that through their still existing bond. For a moment Anakin thought about it but then decided to run with it. Doing so would only emphasize his 'genius' and/or 'gifted' status.

"When we were in here before she woke up," he said with as much innocence and puzzlement as he could.

"I never said that aloud, Anakin," Obi-wan insisted.

Anakin simply blinked at him for several seconds before forcing himself to look down and away. "Oh."

Obi-wan stroked his chin with his hand and regarded Anakin for several seconds. Good. It meant he was putting it all together. Hopefully he wasn't putting *everything* together, but only what Anakin wanted him to. Well, time would tell.

"Anyway," Obi-wan said as he rose. "I need to go to a briefing soon. Anakin, we should probably leave Siri to rest."

"Already?" Anakin asked, hoping he put enough whine into his voice. That's what kids did, right? Well, Sith didn't whine...ever. He hadn't done that in more than a quarter of a century. Apparently it took Siri back too because she stared at him as if he'd suddenly grown two heads.

Obi-wan apparently bought it because he smiled down at the younger boy. "Yes, already."

"It's alright," Siri said from the bed, surprising both of them.

"What?" Obi-wan asked.

"I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot," Siri said as she scratched the back of her neck in supposed embarrassment. Anakin knew it wasn't real, but was pleased to see that she could still pull off her acting when she needed to.

She turned a smile to Anakin, one that didn't touch her eyes. "Anakin, why don't you stay and we can get to know each other better."

Anakin raised his own sardonic eyebrow at her for a second before breaking out into a grin. "Ok!"

Obi-wan looked between them, puzzled. But after a moment, he seemed to shrug it off and walked towards the door.

"Very well then. I expect this room and preferably the Jedi Temple to be in one piece when I come back?"

"Oh, get going you nerf," Siri said, her smile suddenly genuine.

Obi-wan returned it, winked at Anakin and then left. They both stared at the empty door for a few seconds before Siri's expression cooled and she narrowed her eyes at Anakin.

"What a convincing act."

Anakin shrugged her displeasure off and sat on the chair Obi-wan had vacated. "We still share a bond, so I don't believe he bought it completely."

Siri's frowned turned puzzled. "You still share a bond? But you both said you aren't his padawan."

Anakin nodded. "It seems I have brought all of my bonds back in time with me." He locked gazes with her. "And I mean *all* of them."

She caught onto that and paled slightly. "You mean...Palpatine?"

The former Sith frowned. "Call him Sidious while we are alone. Palpatine is just his cover, but yes."

"So he can still feel you?"

Anakin thought for a moment. "Only when I channel the Dark Side. Obi-wan, on the other hand, seems to be able to sense me at all times. I am unsure as to what this means."

She paused for a moment, digesting that. "Did you ever have any other bonds?" she asked.

"Only with my apprentices."

Siri seemed a bit taken aback. "Apprentices? I only remember you having one."

Anakin's expression turned dry. "As a Jedi, I only had one."

The older Jedi didn't seem to know what to make of that for a moment, but then she brought a hand to the bridge of her nose and massaged it. "I really shouldn't be surprised."

At that, Anakin frowned. "Do you not remember?" She shook her head. He brought a finger to his lips and cupped his chin in that hand. "I was under the impression that you remembered everything from the previous timeline."

"Even if I did, why would you think you would have been my main focus? There were other people I cared about a little more." *Like Obi-wan and Ferus.*

Anakin conceded the point with a nod and wave of his hand. "I feel I am required to ask what you do remember, then."

Siri frowned. "Well, everything's the same up until the coma. After that...it's like everything split into two. I remember going under-cover to bring down the Spice Ring, I remember the Clone Wars, I remember several missions with Ferus..." At that her glare returned. "And could you *please* not drive him from the Temple this time?"

Anakin couldn't help his indignant sniff. "It was his choice to leave. I may have influenced the events leading up to his decision, but I did not make that decision for him. However, I believe I can prevent

Darra's death, if that is what you are asking."

Siri sighed. "At least I have a few more years until he'll need to be taken again."

Anakin blinked in surprise at that. "Again?" he asked, wondering if she simply meant to take him as an apprentice in this timeline (which would be the second time for her), but something told him that she'd meant something different.

The woman looked rather put out at his question. "He's older than you, but I was a Padawan when you were 13 and thus could not have a padawan of my own. Did it not occur to you that someone else must have taught him?"**

Truthfully Anakin had never cared enough to consider it. "Very well," he returned finally. "Who was his first master?"

"Master Miito Gatra."

Anakin sat back in his chair, running through the names of the Jedi he'd known but came up blank. "I do not recall him."

"I'm not surprised," Siri said with a shrug of her own. "He was an older master who died in his sleep. He was extremely traditional and had a very large influence on Ferus." Which actually explained a great deal about the boy Anakin remembered.

"I see," he said.

"Ferus was there when he died. Said he had talked it over with a mind healer and didn't need to discuss it ever again. I don't think he ever really got over that death, though, even if they were only Master and Apprentice for a few years before Master Gatra died."

"I shall...endeavor to keep that in mind. However, I would like to get back to the question at hand: what do you remember?"

She didn't look happy at his insistence, but she answered him anyway. "I remember...most of my life before I died. I would say 85 – 90 percent at least. I remember far less after."

"That is...unsurprising," Anakin finally said. "If disappointing."

"Yeah," she muttered grumpily.

"Still, it may prove to be of little consequence, if I can change the

timeline to a point where the Clone Wars never happen."

When she looked at him this time, her eyes held no contempt at all, only surprise. "You want to stop the Clone Wars?"

He scoffed openly. "Of course. I plan on eliminating Sidious long before that time, and if the Force is willing, perhaps the entire Sith Order." He glanced back at the other Jedi to see her staring at him with an unreadable expression. "Is something the matter with my goals?" he asked, only a touch defensive.

"You do realize that if you eliminate the Sith Order, you will be eliminating yourself, right?"

If he were anyone else, he may have rolled his eyes, but he didn't. Instead he just resumed his indignation when he stared at her. "No, I simply do not pass such practices on and destroy any records I can find of it. Having been a part of that Order, I believe I am uniquely qualified to do this."

She raised her eyebrows even more before turning away, apparently conceding to his point, even if she still wasn't happy about it.

Anakin allowed himself to sigh. "Do you still not believe I have fully returned to the Light?" His tone came out just a tad sharper than he'd wanted.

The glare she shot him spoke of a defensive discomfort. "Those things that I do recall after I died...many of them are about you. I don't know why, but I can clearly remember the slaughter at the Temple, Obi-wan's death, the destruction of a dozen planets and colonies, the torture of so many people... Your 'return to the light', it's hard to believe."

Anakin didn't answer, staring straight ahead and not really seeing anything as her words brought back extremely unpleasant memories that he would have preferred to have stayed buried. He understood where she was coming from and, well, she had at least spoken honestly.

"Besides, so few people have ever come back from the dark," she muttered.

He could have told her his theories about how the Dark Side twists ones mind, or about how absolutely addicting it was or about how there had indeed been people in history who had turned back

(although they tended to be painted as weak and useless in the Sith histories), but his words reverberated hollowly in his head and would sound as if he were making excuses if he spoke them aloud.

He knew where she was coming from, and he knew that she was right, no matter the reason. "I know," was all he could say.

Anakin felt a wave of puzzled wariness from her through the Force and wondered how he could feel it so certainly and strongly. Perhaps because of their shared future? Or their close proximity? Before he could ponder further, she spoke.

"Shouldn't you be arguing with me? Telling me you are light?"

He finally found himself able to focus on her face, blank except for the wariness he'd felt earlier. "What good would such actions do? You are correct. Were I in your position, I would undoubtedly feel the same and be even more...adamant about my opinion.

"I also cannot guarantee I will never turn again."

She jerked away from him as if he'd stung her. "What?!" she hissed angrily.

He shook his head. "I still must fight the urge to use that power every day. It is marginally easier now that I know what the price for that power is, but it is still there...calling to me. I feel it everywhere I go, in everything I do, just as I could always feel the light, even as a Sith." He didn't notice how his arms crept around his stomach, holding it as if he were nauseous. "As such, I can only promise that I will do my best and that will have to be good enough."

"And what if it isn't?" she asked, and while the anger had faded, he could still sense it.

At that point, he looked her straight in the eye when he spoke. "Then we will know that Obi-wan—our Obi-wan—was wrong. That is all."

"What do you mean 'that is all'?! It is most definitely *not* all! How many people will suffer if you decide to join the Sith again?!"

He found himself sitting forward in his chair to emphasize the point he was about to make, and his voice came out angry and defensive. "That is something I *can* guarantee. I will never join the Sith again. Even if I fall, even if I—for some inconceivable reason—take on that name again, I can promise you that I would destroy Sidious and his

ridiculous notions before I did anything else.

"However," his voice dropped back down to a calmer, sadder level, "that is also why I cannot guarantee that I will not fall again. I hate that man. I despise everything he stands for. I *loathe* what he took from not just me, but the entire galaxy just so he could gain power. I hate him, Siri, and I always will."

And for some reason, that felt immensely *good* to say. Just the fact that he *could* say it without really changing her opinion of him held a sense of freedom and relief that he wasn't sure he'd ever felt before.

He heard her sigh and saw her massaging the bridge of her nose again. "I should say you need to let it go...but I really can't blame you. Everything that he did... Your choices were your own," she shot a glare at him. "But I know how the Emperor manipulated you. How he manipulated all of us. I...feel similarly, actually, and I will do anything to stop him."

Her words set off alarm bells in his head and he felt his eyes go wide in worry.

"Don't!"

She blinked and turned to him, confused at his outburst. "What?"

"Those feelings...I have them because of who I have been—what I have been. I am not sure I will ever be able to purge them from my mind or soul. You don't have that problem. Please, don't let those emotions influence you. They will orchestrate your fall just as easily as they did mine."

She seemed to watch him with that unreadable expression as he pleaded with her to understand him, to realize just how right he was and to listen. After a moment, she sighed.

"Very well, I will try."

He almost quoted Yoda there, but felt that now wouldn't quite be the moment. Trying was all he could really ask of her.

"Thank you," he said, relief flooding his voice.

She smirked a little and eyed him for a moment. "You really have changed."

He was a little taken back by her comment and had to process it for a few seconds before he found himself smirking back. "I certainly hope so."

She regarded him for a few more seconds before letting out a sigh and shaking her head. "Alright, Anakin, I'll trust you for now, but if you *do* fall again, you won't get a chance to come back. I will do what I have to to make sure you don't threaten the future as you did before."

She said the words with such conviction that Anakin couldn't help himself from believing her. He blinked at her for a few moments before slumping in his chair with a relieved sigh.

"Good."

"Good?" she asked, surprised.

"I can't trust myself, Siri. Not after what I've done. But I can trust you, if only because I know you would never turn on Obi-wan, let alone the Order. This removes an immense amount of pressure from me.

"Now we'll have to build up your lightsaber skills—"

"What do you mean?" she asked indignantly. "I was at the top of my class in saber fighting."

"Perhaps, but when I came back, I found that I had difficulties with even the basic katas. I believe it was because of my younger, unconditioned and very biological body. However, because of my experience, I find myself progressing at an extremely accelerated rate. I believe it will be similar for you.

"Also, you have been confined to a bed for several months. You will need reconditioning."

Her look of displeasure deepened. He was sure she wasn't pouting though...well, fairly sure.

"Fine," she finally said.

"I practice every night, usually in the black room, if you would like to join me," he offered.

She nodded. "I'll think about it."

"Very well," he said as he slid off of the chair. He hesitated slightly, feeling awkward and unsure for a moment. After a moment, he bowed

to her. "Thank you, Knight Tachi."

She nodded at him and he turned to leave. He did notice that when she smiled this time, slight as it may be, the expression in her eyes that went along with it seemed far more warm and accepting than when he'd first entered the room. He considered that leaps and bounds of progress and couldn't help but feel satisfied and relieved as he left the room.

He didn't catch the troubled expression on Siri's face as he disappeared from her sight.

Chapter End Notes

*I recently found out that Courscant works on a 5 day work week, with no weekend. 5 weeks make a month They have three extra weeks, and 3 holidays, for a total of 368 days a year. I am, however, going to simply say that the 'two days a week' thing that Anakin is required was set up like this so he could have a little more time to absorb the lessons. So if he saw Xio on the first day of the first month and Girth on the third day of the first month (which isn't what happened, but hypothetically speaking) then they would see Anakin on the third and fifth day of the second week respectively.

I'm not sure how the Courscanti system work with days off, but not having more than one a week is not something I would find pleasant. Glad I don't work on Courscant.

**This was something that really bugged me in the books. Seeing as they were all written by Jude Watson, one would think she'd catch that, but seeing as I've let worse slip in my own stories, I'm not going to complain too much and simply give them a reason as to why Ferus ended up being Siri's Padawan although she was under cover in a spice cartel and technically not even part of the Jedi Order when he was 13. *shrug*

Sorry, guys, but I've been traveling a lot and trying to apply for jobs, so writing has seriously slowed down. Fortunately, I have about the next...two chapters beta read and ready to post, so you guys have at least two more weeks of somewhat steady posting- although it's going to be hard for me to reply to your comments. Please know that I read every one of them and many of them have fed my muse so that I can keep going on this! I'm so sorry if I haven't responded to any comment, but I want to! So please

forgive me for this. Between the 4th of July, a baby blessing and then a family reunion coming up next week...well, things are just really hectic.

Thanx to Batfan7 for beta-reading this! :D

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin found it alarmingly easy to get into the supposedly high-security hotel. A couple of mind tricks, a few picked locks, one or two subtle feeds to the camera, and no one would ever know he was there. Well, no one whom he didn't want to know in any case.

He was dressed in his 'Luke' disguise, with the exception of the mask. That he'd traded out for something that looked more standard for a race that had difficulties breathing in an oxygen rich atmosphere. He found that grimly amusing, as his life-support mask when he'd been Vader had done exactly the opposite.

He also wore the blue and gold uniform-jumpsuit all of the cleaning staff in the hotel wore. It felt strange to move in, and all too baggy in far too many places, but he wanted to get in and out quickly, which meant he didn't have time to tailor the suit to his much smaller body. With his arm extensions and stilts it fit well enough and so he would make do.

The top floor required a little extra hacking, but again, it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. He led a cleaning droid he'd reprogrammed into the entry way of the floor and rang the bell that signaled room service.

When Dooku opened the door, Anakin bowed respectfully.

“What is it?” Dooku asked, his tone void of any emotion.

“Sir,” Anakin said. “A message just arrived for you. The sender requested that it be delivered personally.”

Anakin had actually arranged for a message to be sent to the hotel before hand and had intercepted the messenger. It had been, in his opinion, what made his plan so perfect. He hadn't wanted to take the man's card, which was why he'd hacked into the floor, because if the man woke up and went about his business with nothing amiss, it would add to the chances that Anakin wouldn't be found. If the man decided to deliver the message anyway, he would be informed that someone already had and that would be that. Of course, the message he was about to hand over to Dooku wasn't by any means the message

he'd sent to the hotel.

With a wary frown, Dooku reached out and took the data pad. He read over it an blinked then looked back at Anakin, who stood in the doorway. The letter on the data pad actually told Dooku a good deal of his plan and what the Count would need to do.

“The message requires a response.”

“Yes, sir,” Anakin said.

The count frowned for a moment before stepping aside. “Very well. Come in and wait while I compose a reply.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once Anakin and the droid had stepped inside (apparently every member of the staff was required to have a cleaning droid with them at all times), Dooku turned towards one of the large, comfortable chairs in the finely decorated suite. The floor was covered with a thick layer of cream-colored carpet that matched the door frames and curtains. The walls themselves were painted a soft green color which blended nicely with the darker greens and golds of the furniture. A few wooden tables (and Anakin would bet that they were made of *real* wood, not a fabrication) stained a dark, warm brown scattered around the room supporting the light fixtures and displays of modern art from various worlds.

The first time around, a room like this would have floored Anakin, but he had recently been second-in-command of the entire Galaxy. He may have rather spartan tastes himself, but what he'd had material-wise had always been top-of-the-line.

“Oh,” Dooku said before he sat down, “I was just about to draw myself a bath. Since you are here, please do it for me.”

“Of course,” Anakin said, ignoring how acting so subservient to *Dooku* of all people grated on his nerves. It had, after all, been part of his own plan.

Anakin hurried into the bathroom and closed the door part way after the droid entered. Then he nodded to the droid and it took to scanning for bugs. They found three. Anakin turned on the water for the bath tub with the Force as he fished the first bug out from its hiding place behind a light on the ceiling and deactivated it. A few seconds later, he had the other two laying out on the counter, both

also deactivated. Not a minute later, Dooku walked in and noted Anakin sitting casually on the edge of the tub.

“Quite ingenious,” Dooku commented. “If unexpected. Why did you not contact me by previously agreed upon means?”

Anakin shrugged. “First, how can they expect my contacting you if you yourself do not? Second, I do not wish for them to catch onto our method of communication. Truthfully, I believe they already have, even if they do not know the code we are using. This is a simple solution, although I doubt I will be able to use it often.”

The older man conceded the point with a nod of his head. “We do not have a great deal of time, I assume.”

“Undoubtedly not,” Anakin agreed.

“Then why have you come?”

Anakin cocked his head. “I wished to hear your thoughts on the election.”

Dooku frowned. “That is all?”

A scoff from behind Anakin's mask. “A Sith Lord has been elected as Supreme Chancellor and you ask if that is all?”

“Ah, I see,” the Count nodded sagely. “You wished to ensure that I would keep my promise to not approach Palpatine.”

“Actually, I had wondered if he made the attempt to contact you.”

Dooku paused for a moment, studying Anakin. Then he shrugged and nodded. “Yes.”

“As I suspected.”

“Then why did you ask?” Dooku asked pointedly, although with no reproach in his voice whatsoever.

“To confirm my suspicions,” Anakin said as he rose. “And to warn you. Everything that man says has a grain of truth to it, but that truth is twisted in ways that are difficult to see and any truth he gives you *always* hides a lie.”

“Of course he does. He is a politician.” Dooku looked indignant. “I can handle myself in the political arena.”

“I am sure you can,” Anakin said flippantly, as if it were a given (mainly because it was). “It is just that Sidious has created an entirely new level in this playing field. I do not like to acknowledge this fact, but I do not believe that even *I* fully realize the extents of his manipulations, and I know about almost all of his plans.

“Also, because I believe our method of communication has been compromised, I wished to give you the next meeting time in person. I will still post something on the forum, but you should disregard it unless I use the word 'emergency' in the message.”

Dooku blinked at him for a few moments before shaking his head and chuckling wryly. “You seem to like doing things the hard way.”

Anakin couldn’t help but return the chuckle (and wasn't it a strange feeling to sit in a room—a *bathroom* of all places—laughing mutually with Dooku) wryly. “You have no idea.”

With that, he held out his hand for the data pad. Dooku handed it over and without further ado, Anakin left the bathroom. Once outside, he turned and bowed, knowing that the noise of the still filling tub would overpower anyone trying to listen for him at this range. “The first listening device came from behind the light fixture. The second behind the waste disposal and the third from the hem of the shower curtain.”

Then Anakin straitened, turned and strode confidently out of the room as the droid followed behind him. Once he reached the droid bay, he powered the droid down, took its memory chip, stripped his uniform off and left the way he'd come in, through the garbage chute. As he slid down the slimy tubes just barely big enough for him and the bag full of his extensions that he dragged behind, he mused that he actually found it easier to break out than he had breaking in. He also doubted anyone would think to look in the trash chutes. It wasn't the smelliest or dirtiest thing he'd ever done, but that didn't mean it was pleasant. He would need a shower rather badly either before or just after he got back to the Temple.

Not five minutes later, he was out of the hotel and managed to sneak away with another group of beings who had gathered around the building's trash heap. He made sure he looked like nothing more than a street urchin from the lower levels scrounging for scraps of a meal in the trash containment area.

xXx

Anakin tapped the top of the library table with one finger as he studied the mostly blank document before him. It was titled (very originally) 'How I Feel About the Jedi Temple'. That happened to be the only thing he'd written.

Girth had undoubtedly wanted to give him a topic that would make him think while giving the mind-healer more insight to Anakin's state of mind and where he stood on being at the Jedi Temple. The mind-healer had undoubtedly never considered that his assignment would prod a very touchy subject. Well, he probably hadn't thought it would be as painful as it was to Anakin in any case. Girth didn't, after all, expect his child student to have a past as a man who fell to the Dark Side and led an army of clones down these very Temple halls, slaughtering anyone they came across.

Of course, Anakin couldn't exactly put that into a report or essay or whatever the Force this was. The problem was, he wasn't sure he could accurately portray his ideals from when he'd first come to the Jedi Temple either. He'd been so young and relatively innocent and hopeful and....

It hadn't been anything like he'd expected. Everything had just been so...*wrong*. And yet it had been *right* and he really wasn't sure he could even try to put that on flimsy (or a word document as the case may be).

“Gah! How do I do this?!” he hissed to himself, throwing his hands into the air. Immediately he berated himself. There was his temper flaring again. He almost groaned. Almost. His control may have been slipping a little as of late, but he still had enough to contain that in public.

And there was a slight concern. He hadn't let his control slip on a regular basis this badly for decades. As a newly fallen Sith Lord, he'd often thought that letting his anger out would become part of his life. That had been yet something else that had come as an unpleasant surprise. Sidious had...strongly encouraged him to control his temper with the idea of letting it out only when it would be useful to him. Anakin (well, Vader) had never quite mastered such control, although he'd seen the logic behind his master's reasoning.

Now, though, he didn't want to lose control of his temper at all, even in small, relatively quiet settings like this. Anger encouraged the dark side and giving into his anger was something he refused to do again. He would not fall into old habits!

The problem was, he didn't want to ignore the feeling either (that was the Jedi way and he firmly disagreed with it), but he hated that he felt it. He hated that his anger seemed to be getting *harder* to control now that he'd returned to the light. What did that say about him? Especially since he'd started these stupid mind-healing sessions (no matter how thought-provoking they had—surprisingly—proven to be), he just seemed to almost be reverting to his childish tendencies and abilities (or lack thereof) in his emotional control. He enjoyed—well, *appreciated* his sessions with Girth, for the most part, and hadn't even minded the last session with Master Xio all that much, but if this was some sort of response to exploring his past, then perhaps it would be better to stop trying to even appear to put in an effort.

Then again, he had no proof that his current situation had anything to do with the mind-healing sessions. It could just be his general disposition showing through. It could be his growing frustration at his situation and the fact that he couldn't seem to do more than delay one or two major things. And even if his current state of mind did have something to do with the sessions, that still didn't get him out of writing this stupid assignment.

Perhaps he should just lie, just hurry and write something that he knew would satisfy the drall. Something about how big and intimidating it was and how everyone around him seemed so different from everything he knew. It was all true, for the most part, but somehow Anakin actually found that he *wanted* to do this right—to be completely honest in his general feelings about the Jedi Temple. The idea that everyone might know just how much of a monster he really was scared him to death, but it would be so *liberating* to not have to lie about it anymore; to not keep it shut away inside of him somewhere to fester and grow as the Emperor had wanted. To acknowledge it as Girth had encouraged because it went against anything he had been taught as a Jedi or a Sith. And it seemed like the right thing to do somehow.

And wasn't that childish of him to think?

“What seems to be the matter?” a voice to the side of him had him jumping and reaching for his lightsaber. He stopped just in time when he noticed the Chief Librarian, Jocasta Nu, standing next to the table and looking at him expectantly. She'd noticed his flinch and movement, but hadn't so much as moved a muscle herself.

He was glad she hadn't as it would have been harder to suppress his instincts, but at the same time he almost wished she had because just

seeing her standing there, calmly staring at him as if she didn't know him brought back too many bad memories.

Shoving said memories from his mind, he forced himself to relax a little and mentally berated himself for becoming too focused on his own inner thoughts *again.* He'd promised that he wouldn't do that. Yes, this growing lack of control needed to be handled. Badly.

“Master Nu,” he said with a respectful nod of his head. The librarian had always commanded his respect. Even at the end, although he'd been too disgusted with the Jedi in general and too drunken on his own power in the dark side at the time, he'd still killed her quickly and efficiently, giving her the respect of a fast death instead of drawing out her pain...although to this day, he wasn't sure if that had been because of his perceived lack of time (he'd had to get what he needed to know from Palpatine to try and save Padme as soon as possible after all) or his respect for the woman, but he found he liked the idea of it being the latter.

“I don't believe we have met,” she said politely, just a touch of coolness to her tone.

He blinked in surprise. He hadn't met her in this universe yet? That was worrisome. He could have sworn...could that mean that he was confusing his past life's memories for his present life's memories? That did not bode well.

He noted that she was still waiting for a response and shook his head to clear it. “Oh, forgive me,” Anakin said as he hopped down from his chair and bowed as was the Jedi custom for introducing oneself. “My name is Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Initiate.”

“Initiate Skywalker,” she said with a polite nod of her own. Her tone had warmed considerably. Whether that was because she'd recognized his name and thus that he was more or less new around here, or because he'd hurried to rectify what she'd seen as an oversight, he wasn't sure. “You looked rather frustrated just now,” she said, returning to the reason why she'd approached him.

“Oh, yes,” he said uncertainly. He may want to be pretty honest in his report, but that did not mean he wanted to (or even could at this point) shout his past out to the Galaxy at large. “I have an assignment I am finding...troubling.”

She regarded him for a few moments. “I have seen you in the library before many times. You somehow know your way around well

enough, and don't often seem to need help."

Anakin kicked himself mentally. Of course she would notice that he somehow knew everything about the library when he shouldn't.

"It wasn't difficult to figure out," he said as casually as he could manage.

She raised an eyebrow, obviously not buying it, but didn't challenge him either. Then she glanced at his data pad.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

Anakin found her offer more than a little ironic. It didn't escape him that she represented the very problem he was having with the assignment to begin with. He remembered overpowering her own will in the Force, lifting her off of the ground and summoning her towards him, her wide eyes somehow expressing pain and denial at his conceived betrayal along with a resigned tiredness when she knew she would be out maneuvered no matter what she did. He remembered how it felt as her chest met his lightsaber, the triumph that he'd defeated her so easily (she may have been old, but that did not mean she wasn't extremely skilled with her lightsaber), even the dull thump as her body hit the ground behind him as he walked away.

He grit his teeth and forced himself back to the here and now. "I...I don't think so, Master," he said as firmly and politely as he could. She frowned and looked like she was about to protest (rather indignantly—which never boded well for him, her lectures could be *scary*), so he decided to explain and turned back to the table and his data pad. "My assignment is to explain my feelings on the Jedi Temple. It isn't exactly a topic I can look up." He found that he was getting used to his own strange and often morbid sarcasm.

She raised her eyebrow at him again. "Then why are you here, if I may ask?"

He shrugged uncomfortably but refused to allow himself to feel chastened or threatened by her. Even at his current level, he was positive he could best her if he had to—which he reminded himself of over and over in his head because somehow, she was still intimidating.

"I had hoped that looking up information on the Jedi Temple would help."

“And it hasn't?”

He shook his head, forcing himself to remain neutral and not express his disappointment. “No, Master.”

She frowned. “Why are you having such a problem? From what I have seen and heard, you normally do not have such difficulties.”

Oh, she had to be friends with Master Kleon. He was sure of it, even if only from the gleam in her eye as she'd said 'from what I've seen and heard'. Wonderful. He knew she wouldn't leave him alone until he gave a more satisfactory answer, and it would have to be rather convincing if she knew of his supposed genius.

He frowned as he looked back at his data pad, wondering what he should say.

“I am not...accustomed to expressing my thoughts in such a manner.” That should do it. It was even mostly true, if not the main problem.

Her expression softened. “You know,” she said after a moment of silence, “I have often found that the simplest approaches tend to work the best. I have also come to realize that if I have difficulties in choosing which thoughts to express and how to express them, that simply writing everything down as it comes to mind or speaking aloud to a recording device can help me to organize my thoughts later. Your first draft does not need to be perfect as it will not be the final assignment you hand in, correct?”

Anakin put a hand to his chin and tapped his lips. He refused to stroke his jaw as Obi-wan used to do, but touching his maskless face did help to calm his mind a great deal. Her words rang true, and it would allow him to pick and choose what he could put in his final draft and allow him to honestly fulfill the spirit of the assignment as well.

After a moment he glanced up at Master Nu, a rare smile, small but sincere, on his lips.

“You are indeed correct, Master, and your words have given me an idea. I thank you.”

She smiled back at him and nodded her head slowly. “You are most welcome, Initiate. If there is anything else I can help you with, please ask.”

“Of course,” he said, returning the nod. She moved on and he packed

his things away. If he would be doing this as she had suggested, he didn't want to give anyone the chance of reading something they shouldn't over his shoulder. Besides, this felt like something he really should do in the privacy of his own quarters.

xXx

The assignment came surprisingly easily once Anakin really started putting everything down. He knew he didn't really have the time or patience to explain the background for everything in his writing (and he would most definitely never be a novelist of any kind if this chaotic mess of words was anything to go by) but by the time he finished, long into the night, he had a good fifteen pages of what would probably look like insane rambling to any outsider reading it.

In the essay he described how the Jedi Temple had stood for nearly a millennium, was built on a nexus of the Force and how generations of Jedi had lived there, using it as both a base and a home. He'd written that to get basic facts out of the way and start him in on the general idea.

Then he went into what he remembered feeling the first time he'd seen the Temple. That hadn't been so easy (and he had to reassess his previous thought that he'd become used to identifying and portraying his emotions). It still hurt to admit that the building had seemed like both a beacon of hope and an unobtainable dream. He managed to put down how overwhelmed and intimidated he'd been by a structure larger than any he'd ever seen before. He described how the Jedi had seemed like Gods among men for quite a while, even after he'd taken up residence and how he'd wanted the Temple to become his home...and how it never really had.

Over the years, his positive, naïve view of the building as an impenetrable fortress held by the light had dimmed as his view of the Jedi as people to look up to diminished. The Jedi Temple had come to stand for everything he felt was wrong in his life during the Clone Wars while simultaneously providing a safe haven of sorts whenever he'd returned to Courscant. It proved to be a rather painful conundrum even now.

Then it got really hard.

He reached the night of Order 66 and couldn't write any more for more than an hour. He'd refused to let himself leave the room until he'd been able to put *something* down. He did not want to relive that

night. Part of him still reveled in the memory of it, the power he'd exerted, the command he'd had, the result that he had almost single-handedly brought down the entire order in a single night. True, the Jedi had been scattered across the Galaxy, but there had been a good number of knights and masters that had remained behind. The Temple had become nothing more than an obstacle to him, and it had burned. Everything that had held him back had burned along with it, or so he'd thought.

Ha, what a lie.

The other half of him was ashamed that he still thought that way, deeply regretful of the lives (almost all of them completely innocent) he had taken and he felt *broken* in a way he didn't think could ever be truly healed again. The guilt that the walls of the Temple had thrown upon his soul when he'd seen it for the first time after coming back in time had never really dissipated. He still remembered each and every face of each and every child he'd slaughtered that night.

Then, for years, he hadn't allowed himself to think about the Temple much at all, except to taint each memory even more and draw anger and hatred from the images burned into his retinas.

And then he'd gotten a second chance. Something so rare, and something that so few people received. He still wasn't sure if it was a curse or a blessing.

Now, as he thought about it, the Temple seemed like a fairy-tale structure that he found himself disenchanted with. It still held a certain majesty and awe to it, but mainly he simply saw it as merely a place simultaneously housing dark memories and a hypocritical, arrogant society where it had once housed hope and a future for him. He had once looked upon the structure as if it had been a crystal palace, but it had lost its luster in his eyes, and now it sat, a shadow of its former self, breaking the horizon line of Courscant and doing little more.

Once he'd finished with that, Anakin sat back and looked at the document on his holoscreen, feeling as if he'd run a marathon for days on end without any sustenance or sleep. His eyes wanted to droop and his spirit felt drained and so *tired*. But he'd succeeded in doing it. What was more, as difficult as it had been, he'd done it on his own, without help from Girth, or Master Xio, or Obi-wan, or Siri, or Yoda...and as tired as his body was, he also couldn't help the feeling of relieved success and accomplishment. It wasn't something he could turn in, by

any means (actually, he'd probably put the memory of this data pad with the rest of the data chips he'd been storing up from his supposed sessions with D-40), but it gave him a solid place to start.

He spent another hour picking and choosing what he should and shouldn't put in the final draft. Forty five minutes after that, he managed to come up with something he felt would be passable without giving anything away. Fishing out another memory card from the storage desk he had near his bed, he transferred the original document onto it and erased all traces from the data pad.

Feeling as if he'd just gone several rounds with his most advanced training droids, Anakin finally put his assignment down and fell asleep, not even realizing that he had missed dinner.

xXx

“Hey,” Hik'te started and turned around to see a boy from another one of the clans flanked by three of his clanmates.

“Hi,” Hik'te said with a bright smile. He'd seen these guys around before and they seemed nice enough. Unlike some others, they'd tried to make friends with kids from the other clans. Hik'te even recalled them trying to talk with Anakin a time or two. The boy was humanoid, but his skin had a silvery tint to it that marked him as a different species and he looked far more limber than any human could ever be. The girl had red hair, a bright smile and freckles dotting her face, although he could tell that they seemed to be fading and probably wouldn't accompany her into adulthood. The third was a gran with blotted skin who looked rather shy and the fourth was a stocky torgruta male with pale red skin that looked almost pink.

“I'm Tru Veld,” the boy said before pointing to the girl, the gran and the torgruta in order. “This is Darra Thel-Tanis, Hettick Darcion and Biisk Naat.”

“I'm Hik'te Tattikat, this is Coira Marous, Thoran Hilth-Rathon, Maelee Farlight and Hale Borrick. You're from the Squall Clan, right?”

“Yup,” Tru said with a grin. “Mind if we sit with you for dinner tonight?”

“'Course not,” Coira piped up already sliding her tray over to make room for the four initiates.

“So,” Tru said, seating himself next to Hik'te and Coira. “I've seen you

guys around before, but don't you usually have another guy with you?"

"Yeah, Anakin Skywalker. He's new to the Temple."

Tru nodded. "Yeah, I talked to him."

"I heard he's from an outer rim planet," Darra said as she slid in between Maelee and Hale, almost directly across from Hik'te.

"Tatooine," Tru supplied.

Darra looked at him, startled. "How do you know that?"

The silvery-skinned boy shrugged. "I asked him."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully. Then she looked back at Hik'te. "So, where is he?"

Hik'te frowned. "We don't know. He hasn't come to dinner yet."

"Why don't you just go find out where he is then?" Hettick asked in a scratchy voice from the other side of Thoran.

Coira's face blanked, a sure sign that she was doing everything she could to withhold her temper. The only time she never wore her expressions openly was when she got angry.

Surprisingly, it was Hale who answered. "We asked Master Terrin, the Knight in charge of our clan, if we could find Anakin. He said that we should not worry so much and that Anakin can take care of himself. Worrying about him like that will only encourage attachment."

"He's noted that Anakin isn't here and will check to see if he is in his room. If he is, then they'll probably leave him there until tomorrow. He had a session today after all," Maelee said in a firm voice that brokered no argument. Hik'te frowned at her and Thoran kicked her under the table.

"Ow, what was that for?" she asked, indignant.

"Anakin's sessions are his own," Hale said.

"Yeah," Coira piped up hotly. "Don't go shouting about them to the entire cafeteria."

Maelee looked indignant. "I didn't!"

“Hey, it's none of our business,” Tru said in a placating tone. “Right guys?”

Darra and Hettick nodded in agreement. Biisk just shrugged and continued to eat in silence. Hik'te could tell he didn't really want to be there but had probably followed his friends because he didn't wanted to eat alone. Perhaps he didn't like meeting new people? Well, his loss. Hik'te brushed it aside and turned to the other three.

“Good,” the blue-skinned boy said with a nod. “We can ask him tomorrow where he was, right guys?” Everyone nodded. “So, Tru, what's your favorite class?”

And with that they turned their focus to meeting their new classmates, almost managing to push Anakin's absence to the back of their minds. Almost.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry, guys. I still don't have a job. I do still read every single review though!
>
> Oh, as a note, I'm using the term 'bathroom' here because it is used to bathe mostly. Smaller bathrooms will be called 'refreshers'.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin very seriously wondered if Jedi were closet sadists. He'd always hated formal functions, no matter which side of the Force he'd served, and now he would be expected to attend a minimum of three such functions and even more formal dinners within the next year. Not for the first time, he wondered if Obi-wan had sent him back in time as an act of revenge, because no one should have to face these prospects.

To make matters worse, he had spent more than twenty years eating out of a tube, not having to worry about consumption of organic matter where anyone else could see. The concept of politely eating in front of others had never been a strong suit of his anyway (no matter what Padme and his mother had done to try and teach him manners) but now he would *have* to learn how to and—worse—demonstrate. And there were *so* many things to remember. The salad fork was the third fork from the plate on the right, and should always be used even when other utensils besides forks and spoons weren't the norm. The chopsticks were always to be used when rice was served unless it was from Chandrila or Markon or about a hundred other worlds, in which case one had to use the fourth spoon from the left.

He *really* had to talk to Yoda or Yaddle and get out of this stupid Senate program before his situation got much worse (although he couldn't see *how* that could happen at this point) and he decided to destroy everyone just to be rid of the frustration.

"Initiate Skywalker, in the case Pantoran Chateau, common in formal situations recently, is served, because you will be under age, what will be your response?"

Anakin stared back at the Jedi instructor, Knight Sar Labooda, a human female with a calm demeanor and a rather large abundance of patience. She had black hair, light brown skin and watched every child she addressed as if they were an equal. Anakin vaguely remembered her from his training the first time around and had always liked her.

That didn't make him enjoy this mandatory class that was not only

pure torture, but (as far as he was concerned) nothing more than a space-filler that took up even *more* of his rather limited time.

Still, the part of him that had somehow retained some pride wanted to answer correctly and so he thought about his answer. Rejecting anything outright at a function or a dinner was nothing short of a taboo. It would be highly offensive, unless you did so in the proper manner (which, of course, changed with every situation).

"They would not offer such to a child," he said finally.

She nodded, but her movements indicated that he'd only gotten part of the answer. "They shouldn't," she amended. "But that doesn't mean that they won't. Sometimes, servants forget. They won't be used to serving under-aged younglings." At that point she turned and addressed the rest of the class. "What I want you to remember is to not make a scene. If you refuse outright, it will undoubtedly get back to the host or hostess, and that is the best case scenario. One of the other guests could overhear you and call you out on behalf of the host or hostess. Many planets even allow for a duel of sorts, which some people may actually be looking for. A fight against a Jedi, even a youngling, could give them a lot of clout in certain circles.

"So, while the law will permit you to refuse, it would be best to point out your age when you do so, remind them that the law does not permit your ability to partake of the drink (you can also use personal beliefs when you get older, at least in this case), apologize and thank them for asking. Be as polite as you can be. Make sure you smile and it has to look as real and natural as possible. This will point out that the mistake is not on your part while simultaneously stating that you do not bare any ill will towards the servant or the host or hostess."

With that, she shot a warm smile at Anakin before turning to someone else. "Initiate Bocrum, what is considered appropriate for a Jedi to wear to a formal event?"

"Wow," a hissed word filled with amusement had him turning to see Coira grinning over at him. "Who would have thought that there is a subject Anakin Skywalker doesn't naturally excel in."

Anakin shot her a dry look.

She raised her hands in surrender. "Hey, I was just saying. It's nice to know you're human too."

Uncomfortable, Anakin turned his gaze away from her. "I'm not

perfect. Not even close. Besides, what about our Force Techniques class?"

The blond waved her hand dismissively. "You'll get that eventually and you know the theory better than the holo-text."

"Shh!" Maelee hissed at them from the seat in front of Anakin. Coira maturely stuck her tongue out at her friend's back. The former Sith repressed a sigh. Sometimes having to remain in the company of children was nothing short of trying.

"Besides, I never said you were perfect," Coira said, her voice lower than before. Then she paused and seemed to think about it. "Okay, maybe you *seemed* like the perfect Jedi initiate before. I thought for sure you and Olin would be friends."

Anakin could not help his cringe. Had he really been acting like Ferus Olin? The stick-up-his-backside, obsessive compulsive brat with a hero complex surpassed only by his over-active sense of guilt?

This time he actually groaned and lowered his head to his desk. That sounded far too familiar as of late. Why did she have to compare him to Ferus Olin of all people? Still, he consoled himself in the fact that Ferus would ever be found racing in an illegal grunge circuit on a regular basis. He also doubted that the boy would be contacting bounty hunters or fighting the call of the Dark Side at any (and every) given moment...but the similarities were still all too obvious.

Ferus had always been aloof and distant from his peers. He believed so strongly in the Jedi Order that he took the Code as law, and his pride would never let him do anything but his absolute best on everything, no matter the consequences. While Anakin did not believe in the Jedi Order or the Code, he could see how people might think that he did. He'd been trying so hard to make sure that the Council saw him as an upstanding Jedi and recovering darksider that he wouldn't (couldn't) allow himself to *not* be perfect in everything he did.

Maybe he really did need to relax a bit.

Or maybe he could worry about relaxing when he finally took care of Sidious.

"You know, I meant it as a compliment," Coira sniffed from her seat.

"Initiate Marous," Master Labooda asked, head turned in their direction and a disapproving scowl on her face (which, interestingly

enough, did not match the twinkle of amusement in her eyes). Coira jumped, eyes fixed on the dark-haired knight.

"Yes Master Labooda?"

"Could you repeat what Initiate Bocrum just said?"

Coira glanced at the boy, a Rodian, who had just been speaking. Then she looked back at the master and straightened her back.

"Of course, Master. As Initiates, we are not considered full Jedi, and as such we cannot wear the normal Jedi Robes to more than a formal dinner. For the functions, we will be required to wear something befitting the station of the event. For the dinners, our Jedi robes should suffice unless we are informed otherwise before hand. If we are to appear in the public view, the Jedi Robes should be sufficient as well, unless it will be at the aforementioned functions."

The Jedi Knight looked impressed despite herself. Anakin could relate. He had not expected his friend (he internally cringed at the word, it still felt so...strange to even think it) would be able to answer the question. Of course, she could have just assumed that the other boy had given the correct answer and thus she could repeat it herself. He wondered, not for the first time, if the girl everyone had gotten to know was just a facade. Sometimes he caught glimpses of someone far wiser and more observant than even Hale, let alone the other children.

Of course, if that were the case, then she was a far better actor than Anakin would ever be. Then again, he wondered *why* a Jedi Youngling would put forth such an act and could think of no reason. Not that it really mattered anyway. Jedi were just as diverse in their personalities as any other organization in the Galaxy. Perhaps it was an inherited inclination?

With that thought, he dismissed the idea and turned his attention back to the teacher.

"Well done, Initiate Marous, but in the future, I would still appreciate your attention."

Coira blushed and looked down as a few snickers sounded throughout the room.

"Yes, Master Labooda."

She said nothing more for the rest of the class.

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Anakin sat in his Luke Lars disguise, absently sipping at the drink he'd ordered so as to blend into the crowd (not the easiest of gestures as his arm extensions made movement from the table to his head more than a little awkward). It was of little consequence to slip the straw under his mask to take in the warm beverage. He sat on the street outside a small cafe in one of Courscant's small business areas as he waited for his contact to arrive.

In truth, he already knew said contact was there and watching him, but was content to wait. He would show himself soon enough.

It took the man almost twenty minutes to finally decide to grab a seat across from Anakin casually. When he did, Anakin didn't even look up from the data pad he'd taken to reading.

"Would you like to order something?" he said, still keeping his eyes on the data pad.

"No."

Anakin knew that tone of voice from his service with the clones. With a sigh at the upcoming confrontation, he shut the data pad down and set it on the small table, finally turning his attention to the man in front of him.

He knew the face. Everything from the skin tone to the glare in those brown eyes. This person, however, did not hold the genial familiarity Anakin remembered from Rex and Cody, nor did he have the respect a General would command from the other troops. No, this was the original template—the man behind the clones.

"Jango Fett, I presume?"

"I have no less than three remote sniper droids honed in on your position and I myself have at least a half dozen thermal detonators on my person." Anakin found himself impressed that the man could sneak that many into this kind of a guarded area. Then again, it was Jango Fett. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just shoot you where you sit."

Anakin shrugged nonchalantly. "Because I want to offer you a job."

Fett's eyes narrowed.

"I know you recently came into more credits than I could possibly give you, but I'm sure that will not be the only aspect about this assignment that you will find appealing."

"And just how is it that you know everything about my life up to and including my latest Job?" Actually, he'd stated in his missive that Jango would undoubtedly consider going into retirement after he finished with said Job. Considering that it was the job that would lead to him becoming the Clone Template if Anakin had his timing right, it was indeed a logical conclusion. Still, no one should know about that. 'Should' being the operative word.

Anakin scoffed. "Please. I know your reputation. You are not the only one with contacts. In any case, I see little reason to broadcast your secret. I would much prefer to keep my life and my anonymity."

"Anonymity?" It was Fett's turn to scoff. "A little difficult to do if you have a bounty on your head."

That surprised the former Sith. "I do? Already?"

"Yeah. I may just claim it and turn you over to someone who will make sure you don't spill any of your secrets."

So Jango knew that Sidious wanted Anakin. That meant he couldn't reveal himself as a Jedi. If that got back to Palpatine, it would be as good as signing his death certificate file. Well stang. He'd wanted to be up-front with Fett. The last thing he needed was for the bounty hunter to find out his identity as a Jedi and come after him out of revenge or contempt. Now he couldn't mention his status without risking that very scenario. Still, he wasn't about to go and panic. He'd had far too many years of dealing with Palpatine and his hands to allow that kind of lack of control.

"Would you at least like to hear my job offer?"

"You're not being carted away right now."

Anakin saw the point, although he was sure he could take Fett if he had to.

"Very well. I am looking for someone to help with a...venture of mine."

"I'm listening."

Beneath his mask, Anakin smiled and leaned forward. "I know you

served a stint as a slave. I was born one. There is little I hate more than slavery. As such, I am looking to pay you to travel to the outer rim planets and...relieve the slave owners of their property," he spat the word, having no problem showing his contempt as it would only strengthen what he wanted to portray. "I will not be able to pay more than your regular fee, but it will also be an ongoing assignment.

"I actually have a list of slaves and slave owners you can start with." He'd made a compilation of several different slavers throughout the galaxy and many of the slaves he knew would be bonded at this point in time. His mother was on the list, but there were enough slaves from Tattooine and other planets that it shouldn't bring attention to her—and consequently, him. He handed a data chip over to Jango, who plugged it into his com and studied the information suspiciously.

"There are two columns on the list. The right side is a list of owners who tend to treat their slaves well. I will mostly buy the slaves from them with my own funds. The left side, however, I will permit you to be more...creative with."

"No one 'permits' me to do anything," Jango shot angrily.

Anakin shrugged. "Then take it as a suggestion. Whatever you wish. In any case, that is why you should not collect the bounty on my head. In the long run, this will be far more beneficial to you and me and the galaxy at large."

Jango sat back in his seat, still scrutinizing Anakin warily. "You do realize that your one-man revolution ultimately won't make a difference, right?"

Silence fell for several seconds as the weight of the man's words rested on his soul. "I know. More than you can imagine, I know," he finally said softly.

"You make no sense. If you know it won't make a difference, then why do it? Why *pay* me to do it?"

Anakin shrugged. "Maybe it won't bring about some revolutionary change in the entire galaxy, but those slaves that we free? It will mean everything to them."

At this, the bounty hunter shook his head. "Great. I'm dealing with an idealist."

Under his mask, Anakin smirked. "I have been called worse." Jango

studied him for several more seconds, weighing the offer in his mind. Anakin saw no reason to rush him.

Finally the man came to a conclusion as he shrugged and leaned forward. "Alright, you got yourself a deal. I'll keep you a secret as long as you give me a job."

Anakin cocked his head to the side. "While I appreciate that more than you know, I must ask; why are you accepting this so easily?" He'd honestly expected Jango to put up more of a fight.

At this, Jango smiled wryly. "I never was the 'retirement' kind of guy anyway. This'll keep my life from getting boring. Oh, and part of my price will be you telling me how you knew so much about Galidraan."

Again, Anakin shrugged as if to say 'why not'. Actually, he'd been expecting this. "I have contacts in the Jedi Temple and met members of Death Watch. I heard that you single-handedly destroyed their threat. Congratulations. They received their just desserts."

Jango's eyes narrowed. "And you got all of this from your Jedi contacts?" Anakin did note a flare of anger surged through the Force when he said the word 'Jedi'. He couldn't say he blamed the man much.

"Among others," the former Sith said nonchalantly. "Although the Jedi were my main sources."

"Hmm," the man replied. Then he reached out and took the chip Anakin had set on the table before.

"That is also your wages for the first target and my contact information when you will be requiring funds for slave purchase."

The bounty hunter raised an eyebrow, now looking more amused than anything. "You do realize how easy it would be for me to simply steal your money like this."

"That is why I wanted you. I know the code of the true Mandalorians. You will honor your agreement to the best of your abilities, and I will honor mine. Although I will say," and with this he leaned forward, projecting his sincerity through the Force. "If I do find that you have double crossed me, you will regret it. There will be no place you can hide that I will not find you, and if you are lucky, you will die quickly."

Jango actually chuckled at that. "You mean it too. Alright, but I'll say the same to you. You double cross me, and I'll hand you over for that bounty faster than you can blink. Supposedly they want you alive or dead—preferably alive, but accidents happen." Anakin nodded in appreciation. Another reason why he liked working with the Fetts, they never backed down and always supported their claims either with action or proof.

"I believe we have come to an agreement."

"We have," Jango said with a nod before standing up. He looked Anakin up and down once more before he turned and walked away. Anakin watched him go. Then he calmly finished his beverage and headed for the nearest public lift. An hour later, he was sneaking back into the Temple feeling rather pleased with himself. It may not be much, but he'd done something, and that was always better than just waiting and doing nothing.

xXx

The masters still hadn't contacted him. Anakin figured that they were still arguing as to whether they should waste their valuable time on a formerly dark initiate and hadn't yet reached a conclusion. Still, he did find immersing himself in the Force to be much easier than it had been just a week before. It had gone from nigh impossible to highly improbable. At this point, though, Anakin was just happy to take a step in the right direction.

He sat calmly on his bed and focused on releasing all of his emotion to the Force. Doing so daily was a common Jedi practice and highly encouraged (although not often enacted) in the younglings and Padawans. As per a suggestion Girth had made during their session, Anakin made an effort to identify each feeling and try to determine what had caused it before letting it go. Doing this made the task of releasing them far easier to accomplish somehow, which in turn made his likely hood of achieving a trance all that much more possible. He wasn't anywhere near where he had been as a Knight or even a Padawan in his previous life, but the progress was heartening.

He found his newly acquired sense of satisfaction to be rather strange. It wasn't a feeling he often came across. In his life before, whether due to Palpatine or his own sense if inadequacy (or both), he had no doubt he would only feel more and more frustrated that he wasn't where he wanted to be—where he *had* been once. Now, though, he knew his limits, and the fact that he was growing at all was in and of itself a

miracle.

As Darth Vader, he hadn't been able to really push himself physically. Strengthening his robotic limbs through practice wasn't possible, and his breathing apparatus had barely allowed him to talk as it had been so necessary to continually pour oxygen down his burned, scarred lungs. Adjusting and pushing his body simply hadn't been an option. He'd tried to keep his skills up, but he knew that over time they had diminished somewhat.

Now he could keep learning and growing and just being able to *see* what he'd accomplished simply hadn't been something he'd been able to experience in years, and so he found his old sense of impatience was now practically non-existent (at least when it came to this particular subject, it still existed towards many other subjects).

He also noticed that his newly found sense of patience seemed to give him control the Dark Side had never shown him. He was truly beginning to understand why simply powering through every obstacle was not always the best option, whether he had access to said power or not.

With a shake of his head, he acknowledged the last few emotions and was in the process of releasing them when he felt a presence brush his.

"Qui-gon?" he asked aloud, surprised.

Anakin, the man's voice reached him, full of a smile more metaphorical than anything else.

Why are you here? He figured the master's presence had something to do with Siri, but Anakin couldn't figure out what more they could do at the moment. Maybe the dead Jedi had some sort of deep wisdom he felt he needed to instill in the former Sith. Or perhaps he would have a different task to assign Anakin; some kind of training or task he would need for the future.

Or perhaps I am simply here to talk.

Anakin had the good grace to look marginally chastised. He must have been thinking rather loudly for Qui-gon to pick up on his thoughts. He almost brought up his shields, but stopped himself at the last moment. He had no objection to conversing with Qui-gon, and the mental shields would only make that more difficult. He braced himself to put them up at any moment if he felt it would be necessary, but otherwise fought his instincts and left himself open to the presence.

You have already come so far, young one.

The former Sith scoffed. *I am not young.*

You are younger than I.

By perhaps a decade.

A little more than that, Qui-gon's amused reply almost had Anakin rolling his eyes. Almost.

I doubt that such experience justifies your choice of address, he returned haughtily.

A warm chuckle from the deceased Jedi. *Perhaps not. But as it is still true, I will continue to address you as I see fit, young one.*

Anakin shook his head, not wanting to admit that the exasperation swirling inside of him had undercurrents of amusement. *I will not concede or withdraw, but I would like to rest at some point this night, so please tell me what you wish to discuss."*

I came in the hopes that you could share some stories with me about my former Padawan.

Anakin felt the small smile on his lips dissipate. The last thing he really wanted to talk about or examine at the moment was the jumbled mess of contradictions that was his general state of mind in regards to Obi-wan.

I won't ask for anything you do not wish to share, but I did catch a glimpse at one point of a nest of Gundarks?

The memories rushed back before he could stop them. The rest of that mission did not have the best of feelings attached to it (he still shuddered at the idea of the Zone of Self Containment, a state of being that blocked a sentient from feeling anything—he filed the reminder away for later comparison to the Jedi Teachings), but the particular part of the story involving gundarks did have its amusing moments, although at the time it had been anything but funny.

I always had to save him, Anakin started, feeling the pang of pain in his chest and resentment towards the memories grow, but ignored them. This Qui-gon hadn't been around for that and he wouldn't get to see it if Anakin wasn't Obi-wan's Padawan this time around. The least he could do for this man who had risked so much to rescue him from

slavery was recount some harmless stories.

Very well, he finally conceded. *That particular instance occurred after we crash-landed on a planet while...*

xXx

Darth Sidious was displeased. As he had feared, the Bando Gorra brat hadn't been suitable to begin training at all. She simply didn't have the mental capacity and stability to handle some of the basics. He would be the first person to admit that many Sith Lords were not the most mentally healthy people (himself discluded, of course) but the girl had been so obsessed and fixated on her own shortsighted goals that she would not be teachable in addition to actually believing her plans could work in the long run when she really hadn't had the strength or power to do more than begin to bring them into play, no matter what she'd thought.

Which left him at square one in regards to an apprentice. Unfortunately, that hadn't changed in the recent months either. He'd figured that one perk to his election would be the opportunity to contact Dooku. It would be impolite for the former Jedi to not congratulate a friend on such an accomplishment after all.

He'd figured wrong. Apparently Dooku had absolutely no problem being rude when it suited him. Whoever this 'Luke Lars' really was (Vader or not) he had succeeded in cutting Palpatine off from Dooku. Oh, sure, there were ways around this. He *could* show up at Count Dooku's door, but that would be out of character and a little too obvious. He *could* issue a summons and have it sped through the courts, some sort of slight that they would need to discuss (and he actually had a few that would work, even if most of them were pushing the line or completely fake), but that would make Dooku too suspicious.

Actually, Palptine wouldn't be surprised if Dooku knew of his secret identity already. He just didn't have the proof necessary to take his suspicions to anyone, which gave Sidious time. This was a good thing, because he would have to do something drastic to get a hold of the man if he did not come to his senses soon.

He had a few contingency plans in place. Even now he could go and find another Zabarak, or a Nightsister from Danthomir. He was scoping out the Jedi younglings for future apprentices and would have a chance to personally observe them, but again that left him without

an apprentice *now*. Darth Sidious could wait, and he would not rush into a decision that would prove to end badly in the future, but he still found the situation frustrating.

Then again, he functioned better under pressure anyway. It was in his nature and always had been. He enjoyed rising to the challenge and turning problems he faced into advantages. This small setback was no different.

With a new sense of determination, he retrieved his data pad holding the list of all the known Force sensitives in the universe and started at the beginning again. He would find an apprentice worthy of his legacy, and the Galaxy would tremble before their combined might.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, a few things (sit back, this is going to be a long, but rather necessary author's note). First, I found a job. However, it's going to be taking up a bunch of my time so...no guarantees when it comes to updates in the future (if you haven't noticed, this one took a while). Also, I've been running into a few blocks, but Batfan7 is being awesome and giving me ideas and being a great bouncing board and has already helped me out immensely, so you guys can thank her for even being able to get this out at all.

Next, about the story. A lot of people have been asking me why the story is so slow. Well, there's a great line/idea from a book I read once called 'Cracked'. It was about a drug abuse clinic and memoirs from a doctor who works there and the problems they run into on a regular basis. It wasn't dramatized and...well, that was the sad part. Good book. I recommend it (although it does have some language in it). Anyway, the author said that people drop their friends or family members off for a weekend and then expect them to be as good as new. Mental health doesn't work like that. People aren't cars you just give to the shop for maintenance, and fixing mental problems takes a while. Sometimes people have to work at getting over their problems (be they addictions or mental problems) for a lifetime. Success requires a strong basis, and that's what I'm building here.

Okay, I'll admit I sent Anakin back in time to sit back and laugh at him in a situation he couldn't handle. It was an amusing idea and I wanted to explore it and see where it went. However, ultimately I do want him to succeed. I'm not sure how well he will succeed or if he'll survive. Really, I don't at this point, but I'm

trying to do it right. There are still a few things I have to have him at least start before I feel we'll be on track enough for me to time-skip. I mean, we still have to address the fact that he doesn't know Leia is (was? will be?) his daughter or if the Council will make him go to the Senate Building and if he does go to the Senate I'll have to set that up and if he doesn't I'll have to set that up and then there's Siri (who is ending up playing a much larger part than I originally planned for, dang it) and Obi-wan and Jango and Dooku and...well, have you ever seen an acrobat juggle 8-10 pins at once? That's about what Anakin's doing at this point and I feel if I time skip, it will be a cheap way out and that I will be dropping several pins to do so. At least at this point.

SO, general outline for the future (without any spoilers, don't worry), I plan on putting in a few more set up chapters (and I'll TRY to get in some action, but no promises) and then there will be a minor time skip, the climax and conclusion of this story and the set up for the third and final story, which will come after a fairly major time skip. It may not make it to AotC timeline, but it will be close. That book/story should finish off the entire storyline, tie up loose ends, set the stage for the changed future of the Galaxy, etc.

The third story will have a lot more action in it, at least from what I'm planning right now. Lots of rushing around the Galaxy looking for things and destroying things and fighting people and trying to stay alive and trying to prevent wars...you know, typical Star Wars kinds of things. The end of this story should go rather quickly too. It will have a lot of action in it and a lot of things happen that...well...won't be pretty (for the characters at least ;)), so I'm going to apologize again for the story being so slow, but it IS necessary.

Finally, I have to say I'm a bit flabbergasted. I just realized that this story has over 1000 watchers.
One...freaking...thousand...*DIES* And that's just on ff.net! I have over 200 kudos on AO3! I never thought I would get so many! I'm almost as shocked as I was when I found out my Danny PhantomxRise of the Guardian one-shot crossover had more than 800 favs. It's just...unprecedented! *hugs you all* Thank you all so much!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin had begun to see why some beings indulged in 'comfort food'. Not only did he now enjoy eating in general (well, more than he had before in any case), but the idea of having something else to do or even just have in his hands when the prospects may not be promising ended up being far more appealing than he'd thought it would be.

He still didn't particularly care for sweet food above any other, but holding a plate of pastries in his hand while he spoke with Girth about his assignment concerning the Jedi Temple was a small comfort he found himself glad for; undoubtedly the reason why the drall insisted on bringing them to every session in the first place.

They only discussed the assignment marginally. Girth asked Anakin what had been the most difficult part about writing the essay, the approach he took, what he found difficult or not. After a few minutes of answering questions, the drall finally seemed satisfied.

"Well, I look forward to reading this in depth," the mind healer said with a smile as he tucked the data chip Anakin had given him away before turning back to the boy. "It seems you've gotten this down rather well. And you have been practicing analyzing your feelings every night, correct?" Anakin again nodded truthfully. "Excellent. No wonder you're making such progress."

The young Jedi acknowledged the comment with another, somewhat absent nod. He didn't feel like he'd been making a lot of progress. He was certainly different than he had been a few months ago, but not *that* different. Girth had stated the words like it was obvious and an enormous accomplishment, but it wasn't to Anakin. No matter what he did, he couldn't seem to rid himself of the taint of the Dark Side and there were still so many things he had to change both about himself and the Galaxy in general to prevent the awful events of the future from coming to pass.

Girth probably knew Anakin didn't believe the observation on his progression, but he continued the session without further comment on that subject, instead switching to what he had obviously planned to be the main topic for the session. .

"Today, Anakin, I would like to work on identifying feelings you have concerning your past," the mind healer said, watching his patient carefully. Anakin appreciated the honesty and terse nature of the statement, but had to wonder why Girth hadn't been more careful and round-about when approaching his past as he had been before. Probably to gauge Anakin's current mind-set towards the subject. If that were the case, it worked. He felt his breath catch at the words, despite his best efforts. He knew the drall meant his 'slave' past, but he couldn't help but think of his entire past. Even if he could only remember his life as a slave the idea still wasn't appealing. He'd had such a difficult time describing his feelings towards the Jedi Temple let alone the nightmare that came before or even after...

"I know it will be difficult," Girth said gently, "but to overcome and learn to live with some of the events that have taken place, you need to examine them and discover why you felt how you did. Once you can do that, you can begin to accept those events and move past them."

For the first time since the session where he'd met the furry being, Anakin wanted to roll his eyes at the uselessness of Girth's proposal. He knew why he did what he did. He'd always known. He did not want to revisit some of his old wounds for something so unnecessary and pointless.

Then again, it would only be about his slave life, and that wouldn't be quite so difficult. Still pointless, but it would avoid a confrontation with Girth (because said confrontation would undoubtedly get back to the Council and they would not like him disagreeing or refusing to work with the mind healer, which may lead to him landing a permanent cell in the bowels of the Temple for the rest of his life because they would never just let a darksider go).

He still wasn't happy about the idea. Actually, he found the thought of exposing anything in his past to be rather distasteful and really wanted to disregard the drall's suggestion. Was it worth a confrontation? He wasn't sure.

For the first time in several months, he considered leaving the entire situation, just walking out of the session and the Temple and never coming back simply to avoid this pointlessness. It took him a few moments to dismiss the tempting idea. He couldn't leave until he'd taken care of Sidious. He needed allies to accomplish his goal. He needed training as well as a lightsaber (he had come to the Temple too late to go with the younglings on their latest Gathering, and in his

first life he'd had to wait until Obi-wan had taken him to Ilum before he could build his own lightsaber), and he needed to be in a position where he could change the most events. No, he couldn't leave, no matter how tempting it seemed.

"Anakin, would you mind going through some of your memories with me?" Girth asked cautiously, obviously sensing his charge's reluctance. Anakin frowned. He still wasn't comfortable with this, but felt he had little other choice. So he slowly nodded and shoved his discomfort aside.

"You may find it easier than you think," Girth said reassuringly. "You've already spoken of your mother and some of what happened, both positive and negative. So, if you agree, we can start at the beginning. What was your first memory?"

Anakin's frown deepened. "I'm not sure," he said. It was so long ago and a lot of those memories blurred together in his mind when he tried to recall them.

Girth nodded thoughtfully. "Normally I'd begin to teach meditative techniques at this point so we could go back to the first thing you consciously remember, but I know you've already had several taught to you. Perhaps you could try those now?"

The former Sith didn't understand why it was so important, but it wasn't like he couldn't use the practice and if it would keep the drall (and consequently the Jedi Masters) happy, then he supposed he could. So, with a sigh and a mental grumble, he closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, reaching out to the Force as Girth instructed him to focus on his life as a slave, and what his very first memory could be.

After a few minutes, a face came to mind. It was his mother, much younger than when he'd last seen her, with her hair in a single braid over her shoulder. The lighting was dim and dark, but she smiled down at him and spoke...except nothing came out of her mouth. No words, just her comforting presence and that smile on her face.

Anakin took a deep breath and opened his eyes, blinking at Girth. He wasn't surprised to know that his mother was his first memory. How old had he been at the time? It would have had to be when he was very young.

He related what he'd seen to Girth who looked very pleased and Anakin could sense relief from him through the Force. He'd probably

been afraid that Anakin's first memory would be dark and painful. Not an impossibility.

"Do you recall how you felt when you saw her face?" Girth asked.

The former Sith nodded, a small smile on his lips despite his annoyance at the practice. "Comfort and peace. I felt like nothing could touch me because she was there."

Girth chuckled. "Not unusual for young children to feel that way towards their mother. Is there anything else about the memory you would like to discuss?"

Anakin thought about it for a moment before shaking his head. The mind-healer nodded and moved on.

"Very well, what would you say is the next thing you remember or would wish to share? Don't worry too much about bringing up memories in order. That's actually nigh impossible for most humans, and whatever you want to talk about in regards to your past is more than fine. If one memory leads to another one, please feel free to share it if you wish. Don't feel you have to, though."

"I would not be averse to attempting to give my thoughts in chronological order," Anakin said with a shrug. It would make it easier to share as he wouldn't be in nearly as much danger of letting something slip that he shouldn't while still giving the mind healer an illusion of effort.

Girth regarded Anakin with a cocked head for a moment before nodding. "Whatever you are comfortable with."

"I don't remember much of my early youth. I remember my mother, obviously, but while I believe I was not born on Tatooine, I do not remember anything before we came to that planet."

"Why were you brought to Tatooine?" Girth asked cautiously.

Anakin frowned again, this time in distaste. "My mother was sold to Gardulla the Hutt."

Girth must have sensed his souring mood because he spoke in a calm, reassuring tone. "You don't have to share anything you aren't ready to share."

"No, it will be fine," Anakin reassured with a wave of his hand. He still

didn't have the biggest problem relating his time as a slave, even if some of the memories weren't pleasant. He shook his head and cleared his mind, using the familiar meditation techniques to try and bring more of his early childhood life to the forefront of his memory. "I remember little of that time," he reiterated as he cleared his mind of distraction and focused on the time period. "I only..."

He faded off as a memory surfaced.

Pain. So much pain! He screamed and cried and begged them to stop. And where was mommy? Why wasn't she here? Why were these people hurting his back? He didn't understand. It stung so badly! What had he done wrong? The big, fat thing said if he did something wrong he would be punished, but he hadn't done anything! Had he? He must have.

Another sharp stab across his back along with a whipping sound and he couldn't help but scream again. His throat hurt almost as much as his back, and he felt tears falling down his cheeks. He hated this! And he was so scared! Where was Mommy? Mommy would make it all go away!

Then...

Soothing hands holding him and cheeks just as wet as his were. Mommy was sad too. Did they do that to mommy as well? No! No, they couldn't hurt mommy! He held to her, trying to comfort her as much as she was comforting him. And the pain wasn't going away, no matter how much Mommy held him, it wasn't going away...

Anakin's brow furrowed and he realized his jaw had tightened again. His hands gripped his plate tightly enough to turn his knuckles white and they were shaking slightly. His focus and meditation had unintentionally brought up memories he'd thought long-since forgotten. He honestly couldn't believe he still remembered that after all these years, but what was more surprising was how upsetting those memories were. Gardulla the Hutt hadn't been the kindest master and to this day he still didn't know what he'd done to deserve the beatings she'd enforced, but he thought he'd gotten over that long ago.

"Anakin?" Girth's voice drew him out of his thoughts and he met the golden-brown eyes of the concerned mind healer. He didn't say anything. While those memories were not by any stretch of the imagination his worst or most painful he possessed, they still had some very negative emotions connected to them and he didn't trust himself to open his mouth and voice it at the moment. So much for being fine. He could feel the Dark Side's call grow louder as it came

with the pain and fear and anger he'd recalled.

Perhaps this would be harder than he had originally assumed.

"You don't have to tell me," Girth reiterated after a few minutes of silence. "But I would like you to consider telling D-40."

"The droid?" Anakin asked derisively, suppressing a snort. Sure, telling a non-sentient wannabe protocol droid would definitely help him, he couldn't help but think sardonically. He'd probably end up tearing the thing to shreds without even touching it. And what would that do to his resolve? Telling the droid would mean reliving the memory, and he'd drawn power from so many of those types of memories as Vader. It would be so easy to slip back and brush the darkness, and then his plans would simply fall apart and Palpatine would be able to sense him... No, it would be better if he stayed away from those parts of his past completely.

"It's up to you," Girth said. "But you need a healthy outlet for your negative feelings."

"You don't understand," Anakin heard himself say. "I can't." Somehow, he wanted Girth to know. He didn't know how to describe it without giving too much away, but he suddenly wanted this little being that had actually helped him—who actually cared—to understand how *terrible* of an idea his suggestion was. He poured all of his emphasis into his words, but it still seemed inadequate and pathetic. He couldn't seem to make himself say anything else either.

The drall considered him for several minutes before nodding his head thoughtfully. "You're correct. I probably can't understand. But I know this: if you keep those negative memories and emotions locked away, you will never be rid of them. They will stay with you for the rest of your life and any more negative experiences you have will just add to them. Eventually you will not be able to contain them.

"Facing them, understanding why you felt the way you did at the time and then acknowledging that they happened and are a part of you will help you to move past them. That is why we've been working on you analyzing and acknowledging your feelings, so you don't end up containing them until you explode, because it *will* happen."

Anakin felt the color drain from his face. Girth's words rang so true, and hadn't he begun to feel as if he would snap recently? It wasn't something he was unfamiliar with. He'd known, to an extent, that emotions (negative or positive) built on and added to one another. It

went along with both Sith and Jedi teachings, after all. Jedi were taught to release all emotion while Sith were taught to internalize emotions and use the resulting anger, fear and pain as power. But the idea of them building without his awareness had never quite occurred to him. It made sense, but he'd never consciously thought about it like that.

Perhaps *this* was what Yoda meant when he said that once he started down the dark path it would forever dominate his destiny. Once the darkness built, how could he ever be rid of it again without sinking back into it? He couldn't release his darker feelings without the distinct possibility of doing serious harm to himself (not to mention others around him) and having his thoughts twisted by the Dark Side, but if he kept them sealed away it would only be a matter of time before they forced themselves out, most likely in extremely negative ways that would simply have him revert to that which he had forsaken. Was he just a ticking time-bomb?

Additionally, if his memories of his early childhood brought up this kind of a reaction, what would his other, far more painful and shameful memories bring? And wouldn't he have to explore and revisit those as well if he really wanted to be rid of the tension he'd been building for so long? He physically shuddered at the thought. How could he handle *those* if he couldn't even seemingly handle this?! Just how weak was he?!

"I...I can't," he repeated, hating how vulnerable he sounded. The edges of the plate in his hand had started to cut into the skin, but he couldn't seem to relax his muscles.

"You have to find a release," Girth insisted. "That is what these sessions are for. If you cannot tell me or Master Xio, then tell the droid. Acknowledging these negative emotions is the first step to releasing them and the pressure associated with them."

That went along with the Jedi teachings.

"Release them to the Force," he muttered. "Yeah, I know that."

"I don't know about releasing your feelings to the Force," Girth corrected. "I have no idea how one would go about doing that. All I know is how normal, non-sensitives work. You acknowledge your feelings or the traumatic event (usually both), and then you accept that they happened and you can't change that. Then you let it go. Not necessarily the memory per se, but the feelings associated with them.

Once you release them and realize that they have no power over you, they will stop dragging you down."

"Dragging me down?" Anakin heard himself ask and wondered why he had for a moment. He had a vocabulary that did consist of more than repeating what had just been said to him but he couldn't seem to bring himself to use it at the moment.

"Oh, yes," the mind healer nodded emphatically, which only accentuated his normally fast, jerky movements. "Guilt, fear, anger, sadness, they can all cause blocks both mental and emotional. Those blocks can stop you from forming healthy relationships, from learning and reaching your full potential, from adapting to new situations and in extreme cases can even stop some people from functioning in a normal society. Beings in this state are often referred to as people who just exist; people who can't truly live."

Anakin just stared at Girth. He sensed that the being fully believed in his words, and it made Anakin look more closely at them, despite the numbness that had seemed to settle over his mind. That he'd had many if not all of the problems the drall had named for years—decades even—lent a lot of credit to the idea. If Girth was to be believed...wow. Anakin couldn't help the realization that struck him. Was he really *that* screwed up? That...*broken*? And if his counselor was right, he'd been that way almost from the moment he'd been born; from the very beginning of his life, not only his time as a Sith or even as a Jedi.

"What...I..." he started, overwhelmed, but stopped. He didn't know where to begin and he suddenly seemed so lost and alone. How could he begin to try and understand any of it? So many things set him apart from the others around him, most of them being his poor choices and the consequences of those decisions. That hurt the worst, knowing that he was the way he was mainly by his own actions. And Girth had said he'd have to accept all of that? "There are things I've done...I could never accept them."

He felt more than saw the drall frown. "You don't have to accept anything distasteful you've done as good or right. Far from it. Just accept that they happened. Good or bad, those are not things you can change. Remember what I said about 'shouldn'ts' and 'shoulds'? For now, forget that you should or shouldn't feel something. Accepting that you do have those emotions is what will help you the most in the long run at this point."

"What if you could?" Anakin cut in quickly. He didn't want to dwell on this anymore. He wasn't sure he could handle it at the moment and he just wanted to get away from the train of thought for a second. He knew he was grasping at straws, using confusion and something the mind healer would be interested in to distract him, and in any other state of mind he may have kicked himself for potentially giving too much away, especially because he'd have to explain his sudden question, but at the moment he would take just about any other discussion.

Girth, surprised at his abrupt question, stared at Anakin, eyes blinking (creating a rather strange effect, seeing as they were on each side of his head). Anakin got the distinct feeling that few people caught the mind healer flat-footed, so to speak."What if you could what?"

"Change something that happened."

The mind healer still looked confused and he did not seem to be pleased that they had gotten so abruptly off topic. "You mean what if you could change your past?"

Anakin forced himself to nod.

Girth sighed and spoke, not unkindly. "It's not possible, and you need to accept that as well."

"But what if I could?" Anakin said again, more firmly.

"You mean like time-travel?" Girth asked, still sounding perplexed and probably wondering why Anakin had voiced the question to begin with.

"Hypothetically, something like that," Anakin said, voice quiet although he refused to act cowed or sheepish and thus held the other's gaze with as much dignity as he could muster.

The drall frowned but he seemed to consider Anakin's question.

"Or...perhaps, a vision?" the young Jedi amended. Given what most of the universe knew of Jedi, he figured that would put most of his counselor's misgivings to rest. He seemed to be right, as the drall relaxed almost immediately.

"Ah, I see. We're getting into more Jedi territory here, I believe. I will remind you that I cannot answer many questions about the Force, and you may want to bring this up with Master Xio, but I can give you my

honest opinion. What have you been taught regarding such visions?"

Anakin felt the familiar, blank mask fall over his features as he spoke in a dull, lifeless tone. "The future is always changing, and it can take many paths. Visions are of possible futures only."

Girth raised his eyebrow. "You don't sound like you believe that at all."

Anakin hesitated for only a moment before shrugging and realizing he felt more in control again (which came as a huge relief). "I can see how it can be true, but sometimes I see things in dreams and...and they always come true. It's like I live another life."

"I see," the drall mused thoughtfully. "And if you know the future you can change it, so you're asking if you could change something that hasn't happened yet? I guess that would depend on whether the act of seeing the vision itself is part of the envisioned future or not."

"You mean," Anakin said slowly, "whether my having and remembering the vision will bring about the future events I speak of or not?"

Girth regarded Anakin with a knowing smirk, probably unsurprised at Anakin's grasp on the situation, even considering the young Jedi's previously shell-shocked mind-set. "Exactly. Are you seeing a future that you will bring about because you saw the vision, or are you seeing a future that would have happened without the vision?"

"I've had both types of visions, really," the former Sith replied honestly. When his counselor didn't respond for a few seconds, Anakin decided to try and push his answer a little. "So what if I knew the future, and had, in my mind at least, lived it—made horrible decisions that had millions of people die by my hand—and could change it?"

"Do you know if this vision regards your having the vision?" Girth asked carefully, seeming a little out of his element.

"Yes I do," Anakin said, his voice certain. "It doesn't."

The drall frowned, regarding him for several seconds. "You're not telling me everything. Something happened in these visions of yours... My answer will not be the most accurate without the full knowledge of what you saw, but I can tell that you're not ready to disclose anymore. Actually, I'm honored you trusted me with this much."

Well, at least he realized how difficult it had been for Anakin to explain that (not as difficult as revisiting some of his memories, but still not easy).

"So, you are carrying the weight of other lives because of these dreams?"

"Weight?" Anakin asked warily.

"Every decision we make weighs on us, Anakin. The burden of one lifetime can sometimes be too much for a person to bare. You say you practically live other lifetimes in these visions and you remember them as if they really happened. So even if you change reality, would you say that these visions are reality to you?"

Anakin found himself impressed with how well the drall had caught onto the concept, let alone that he'd allowed the conversation to be hijacked. After a silent moment, the young Jedi nodded.

"Yes."

Girth seemed to contemplate Anakin for a moment before he spoke. "So, would you agree that if a government official set up an operation that would ultimately help him acquire a goal but take hundreds of lives in the process and at the last minute he stops the operation, he should still be punished as if he'd gone through with his original plans?"

Anakin frowned, focusing past the twitching whiskers of the other being and locking gazes with him. "Of course not." He didn't like where this was going.

"Then why are you insisting on doing that to yourself?"

The young Jedi looked away stubbornly.

After several seconds of more silence, Girth shook his head. "Anakin, you're punishing yourself for something that hasn't happened. Carrying the burden of that on your shoulders...the weight of multiple lifetimes—of sentient lives you saw lost (despite the fact that they aren't truly because they still exist today in our reality), it's pointless."

"I can't help it," the young Jedi said bitterly. "Because I can't forget it. All of those people..." he looked down at his hands. "My own...family." He just stopped himself from saying 'child'. Dream or not, he did not trust his mind-healer enough to disclose that information. Still, this

conversation was turning out to be almost as uncomfortable as their previous one. Anakin could feel Girth's frustration through the Force for a moment, even though he didn't show it.

"I still think you need to let the guilt and pain you get from these visions go. If it didn't happen to anyone in our reality, then it didn't happen and you shouldn't punish yourself for it. Even if a disaster *would* have happened, if you prevented it then you should count the lives you saved in this universe instead of the lives lost in another one."

"I don't know if I can," Anajkin said truthfully. "I made those decisions... Without the foreknowledge those events will happen. It's still a part of who I am." He shook his head again. "Even if they haven't happened yet, I still remember them, so they exist." Because it hurt more to think of a universe without his son and daughter in it than to think of a universe where his special brand of evil never existed. He couldn't dismiss the other future, no matter how this one turned out. The only thing that eased the pain of knowing his children would probably never be born now was the fact that Padme would live this time around. He would make sure of it.

Girth thought for a moment, stroking the fur on his chin as he did so. "We'll work on getting you to release the negative emotions you gain from these 'alternate futures', but for now, if you feel these 'alternate universes' are real, you need to acknowledge why you chose to do what you did, whether in this life or the others, even if you can't understand or agree with those reasons today. Right now your guilt is overwhelming you. You say that you still remember making terrible decisions. Well, that is something you can learn from. In the future, don't make those decisions. In all actuality, the visions you've described to me are giving you the opportunity to become a better person. Letting the guilt and fear of knowing what 'could' have happened grow inside you will only serve to create those emotional blocks I spoke of earlier. You need to find a way to free those feelings. Speaking and describing the situations aloud is a good form of release. You can't kill with words."

"I disagree," Anakin muttered. He'd seen what Sidious could do with a few well-placed words.

"You have to find a way to release emotions you associate with these memories, Anakin, or they will continue to hold you back," the mind healer insisted. "We've set aside time for you to do that. It's up to you to utilize it."

Anakin didn't answer, unhappy that they'd returned to the idea of examining and revisiting his past. After a moment, the mind healer sighed. "How about we compromise: try it. Just start at the very beginning and tell the droid everything. If it doesn't work, we'll figure something else out. Maybe writing it down. There are many ways to release those emotions, but you must release them, and often that means revisiting them and understanding them, unfortunately even—especially—the difficult memories."

Anakin remained silent as he contemplated Girth's words, thankful that he didn't feel quite so overwhelmed at the moment. Still, could he just open up like that to the droid? He'd have to reset it to its original function and didn't relish that. Besides, what if he spoke and couldn't contain the rage that would inevitably come? The anger and guilt and pain? Would the Jedi Temple just fall a good 13 years early? Although he doubted he could kill everyone in the Temple at this point. He didn't have Storm Troopers backing him up, and he didn't have the skills of an incredibly talented senior Knight on a power high.

Yet

If he had to take a chance, now was the time to do it, he realized. Now, when he could be stopped.

The idea scared him—to death—but the idea of losing control of himself scared him more. He had to do whatever he could to stop that, for the Galaxy at large; for the Jedi; for Obi-wan and Siri and his friends and Padme...

He felt his resolve harden. He'd turned for Padme. He would do something even more difficult for her now. He would save her future, even if it meant he wouldn't be in it.

"Alright..." he heard himself whisper. He couldn't afford to let anything hold him back and if Girth were right, he had to do this. That didn't mean he had to enjoy or look forward to it.

He hadn't felt this terrified since he'd gone to face Luke on Endor. He still remembered how he'd felt when his subordinates reported that they had caught a rebel. He'd immediately known it was his son but hadn't had any idea as to how Luke would react to him. The boy turning himself in had been a good sign, but frightened hadn't begun to express his emotions at the time. Now, with the future's entire existence hanging in the balance...

"On one condition," he added on firmly. "And I must discuss it with

Master Yoda first."

Girth seemed both pleased and confused. "Why would you have to speak with Master Yoda?"

Anakin shook his head. "It is one of those instances where I do not believe you will understand."

The drall frowned. "Can you try to explain it to me?"

Anakin thought for a moment before coming to a conclusion. "Yes. But only after I speak with him."

"Very well," Girth said slowly as he slid off of the chair and onto the floor. "I will contact him."

"Thank you," Anakin whispered, hoping he wasn't about to make a horrible mistake.

xXx

Jedi Grandmaster Yoda walked along the halls of the Jedi Order at a calm, measured pace, leaning on his gimmer staff and returning the nods and greetings of those who passed him. To say he'd been surprised to get a request from Healer Girth would be a slight understatement, especially considering the timing. Healer Girth had been informed that if he had anything to report, he would either do so to Master Xio or the entire council if his fellow mind-healer felt it necessary. They actually had scheduled a time for him to come in the next day to speak with the Council about young Anakin's treatment. That the message had asked that Master Yoda come as soon as he could and the fact that Skywalker should be with the drall now concerned the old Jedi.

Why would they ask for him to come?

He'd dismissed the idea that the drall wanted to circumvent Master Xio's authority almost immediately. Healer Girth had been nothing if not an honest being from what Yoda had sensed, and his history painted the picture of a dedicated professional. Unless he had an excellent reason, he doubted Healer Girth would do anything so petty.

Equally (if not more) unlikely were any nefarious reasons that he may want to call the Jedi Master into the rooms he had been temporarily allotted at the Jedi Temple. If the man was an assassin or spy, he hid it far too well for them to detect, and the Force had suggested that the

drall was trustworthy. Besides, the Council had made sure to keep a close eye on the Healer Girth while he was in the Temple, not to mention they had done their research. Nothing even remotely suspicious about the man had come up in any of their observations or findings.

Only marginally more plausible was the idea that they had somehow come across a security problem with the Temple. It would have to be something fairly major, but not bad enough to go before the entire council (unlikely) or something immediate (only slightly more likely). Still, he had not gotten a sense of urgency from the call, and so highly doubted this.

The first thought he'd actually entertained was that somehow young Skywalker had personally asked for Yoda. Yoda had extended an invitation for him to do so, albeit with stipulations, but it was something he was determined to follow up on. The boy needed support, and Yoda knew he was one of the only people the boy trusted to give it. Really it was amazing what a little bit of well-placed, positive reinforcement could do.

So what kind of situation would have the boy request for his presence? Yoda doubted it would be for anything young Anakin deemed less than absolutely necessary. Had something happened and he'd withdrawn or panicked to a point where Healer Girth couldn't calm him down? He doubted it. The drall would have contacted Master Xio at that point and the Force seemed tense at the moment when he followed its flow towards Skywalker's presence, but not out of control. No, it seemed more anxious than wild. What worried him were the traces of darkness he could sense—as he almost always could—in the boy's signature. They were more pronounced now than at any time since Naboo. That alone was cause enough for Yoda to cut his normal meditation short and answer the call.

That did bring up another thought. Could Skywalker have somehow let slip some of the deeply-rooted secrets of his past that no one (not even Yoda, and if he were anyone else he would find that to be very frustrating) could seem to figure out or even guess at? Perhaps the drall didn't know how to deal with something that could very well be steeped in a dark power. How would one go about trying to help a child that may very well have had to murder in cold blood for his training?

But again, if that were the case, then it should have been taken to Master Xio and Yoda simply could not see the drall doing that.

It was rather perplexing, and Yoda was curious (and perhaps marginally worried) to find out Healer Girth's—and Anakin's—reasoning.

Eventually he made it to his destination and the door opened when he stepped in front of it.

"Ah, Master Yoda," Healer Girth said in his rather high-pitched voice. Yoda walked inside and set the tip of his gimmer stick down firmly in front of him, leaning on it as he looked at the two beings in the room.

"Curious I am as to why you have called me."

Healer Girth glanced between Yoda and Anakin for a moment. The boy seemed to still be lost in thought, although his eyes had never left Yoda. At that point, the drall spoke up.

"Anakin and I have been working on identifying his feelings so that he can learn to release the negativity of his past experiences. I asked Anakin if he would share some of his memories with me, but he wasn't comfortable with that, so I encouraged him to speak to the droid about those experiences. He was hesitant at first, but eventually agreed with stipulations. That stipulation was to call you here so he can speak with you before he sees the droid."

"Ah, young one," Yoda said with a nod of his head as he turned to Anakin. "Why need me do you? Interrupted my meditation, you did." It wasn't said with any malice, but it was a very subtle warning that Yoda would be disappointed if it Anakin didn't have a good reason. Understanding, yes, but still disappointed.

Anakin shifted for a moment before jutting his chin into the air and standing firm. "I have a request."

"Do you?" Yoda asked, still amused and smiling encouragingly.

"I know you have been hoping I would give you information on my former Master," he glanced over at the mind-healer. "The Sith."

Healer Girth just seemed confused at that. Yoda wasn't pleased Anakin had said it aloud to someone who lived and worked outside of the Temple, but he doubted much harm would come from it so he let it pass with a small admonition.

"Speak of such things lightly, you should not, but yes. Waiting we have been until ready to tell us you are."

Anakin nodded, still looking stalwart and all too stiff, like a soldier addressing a commanding officer. Yoda didn't much care for the comparison, no matter how accurate it seemed.

"I...am not comfortable with giving away such information at the moment because I have no proof I can give you, but I can say that he is on Courscant on a regular basis."

Yoda frowned, waiting for a moment to see if Anakin would continue. He didn't.

"Troubling this is as sensed him we have not."

"Sith are masters of deception," Anakin said.

Yoda raised an eyebrow at the boy. "Yes. Learn they do from a young age."

A ten-year-old boy shouldn't pick up on that subtle prod that suggested they were still watching Anakin for any signs of deceit. Even though he didn't seem to move a muscle, Yoda felt a flare through the Force that confirmed he did indeed understand. It also confirmed Yoda's suspicion that Anakin had been a Sith apprentice, not just taught by a random darksider. Very troubling. Anakin seemed to realize what he had given away because he frowned slightly but eventually moved on without acknowledging the comment.

"While going through my...therapy," he said the word with just a touch of distaste, although as to whether that related to the method or the idea that he still had to have these sessions, Yoda could only guess at. "I will be going through some rather...dark memories. I am not confident I can remain in control of my feelings or Force presence..." At that point he shot a half pointed, half pleading look at Yoda.

"Afraid you are that fall you will?" Yoda asked softly, smile replaced by a wary sadness.

Anakin took a deep breath and then swallowed before answering. "Yes."

"Hmm," Yoda said with a nod. It was a valid concern after all, seeing as he already had touched—embraced even—the dark side on Naboo, and who knew how often before that?

Anakin continued. "Also I...I fear I may have a bond with my former Master that I did not know of until recently. If I do fall, he will know I

am here. Not only will that put me in a great deal more danger, but the Temple itself as well."

Yoda took a few more steps towards Anakin. "Know you should that safe the Temple is."

He felt a stab of...was that skepticism coming from the boy? Yes, laced with firm denial and smothered by guilt. How very strange. Why would a young boy feel that way about the Jedi Temple?

"Nevertheless, Master Yoda, I would prefer to continue to hide my presence from him."

Ah, so that was why Anakin had asked specifically for him.

"Wish for me to shield you you do?"

Anakin glanced down although he still hadn't moved his head (Yoda was sure he'd get a stiff neck if he continued to stand like that).

"If you could, Master Yoda."

Yoda studied Anakin thoughtfully. "Know, you do, that shield you every time, I cannot."

At this, the boy's chin finally dropped and he locked gazes with the diminutive Jedi. "Of course not, Master. It's just...truthfully, I don't trust you, but I trust you, and maybe Master Yaddle, more than almost anyone else. I do not know if even your shields will hide my presence from him, but I cannot undertake Healer Girth's method of healing unless I can be reasonably sure he cannot sense me."

"Hmm," Yoda said, thinking. He understood why the boy had asked this of him. He was hiding from his former Master just as much as he was here to train. Although Yoda would have liked for Anakin to have confessed to his motives before, the fact that he was confessing now said a lot about his character and how far he had come already in his healing. Still, Yoda was not in the habit of making hasty decisions outside of battle and he would not do so now.

"Need to meditate on this, I do," Yoda finally said. "Consider this I will. Inform you before your next session I will."

"Well then," Healer Girth broke in brightly, trying to shatter the grim mood. "I would still like for you to spend some time with the droid today, if you wouldn't mind Anakin. Just talk. Tell D-40 whatever you

would like. I'll draft some questions for next time to make it easier for you, alright?"

The poor being had obviously not understood half of what they'd just said, but he seemed to take it well. Yoda found his respect for the mind healer rising.

"Yes." Anakin said, not even bothering to act like a child anymore. "Of course."

Yoda watched Healer Girth lead Anakin into a side room where he could speak to the droid more privately. After a few more moments, the grandmaster turned and left, prepared to meditate on whether he should spend so much time with a single initiate and take that time out of his rather busy schedule. Would he even be up to the task? If the boy's Sith Master was as strong as Anakin indicated...

This was troubling indeed, and Yoda had a sense that they had only scratched the surface of this problem.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yeah, thought this had been posted. I'm pretty sure this is the beta'd version, but if you see anything out of the ordinary, please let me know.

So I have almost a thousand favs on fanfiction and 250 kudos here, not to mention a whole ton of people watching the story and...I'm floored guys! :hug: Thank you so much! I recently reread the whole thing so that I could point out areas I needed to tie up and maybe get through this awful block I have on the next chapter (which is actually why I'm posting my new dark!Obi-wan story as writing in general helps me to get past blocks on most of my stories). If you have any areas that you feel will need to be addressed in the future, go ahead and list them here (because I'm sure I've missed something).

Also, know that while I do not have the time to answer all reviews, I most certainly do read every single one of them and that they do help a lot when it comes to helping me overcome blocks or just to encourage me to write more. Thanks to everyone who has reviewed! It is greatly appreciated! :hug:

Thanx to Batfan7 the amazing!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yoda had seen many people of innumerable races, ages and backgrounds come before the Jedi Council. It wasn't often that he came across anything particularly new or different anymore. However, the Grandmaster would have to say that this would have to be one time when 'different' definitely applied, and he found himself looking forward with some amusement to the proverbial dressing down that Healer Girth was planning on giving the Jedi Masters. True the Council had probably gone over everything he would bring up, but the Grandmaster still expected that it would be interesting.

"Masters," the short being said respectfully as he bowed deeply having just been shown into the Council Room.

"Come before us today to discuss your worries you have? Concerning young Anakin Skywalker, they are," Yoda said, deciding to get straight to the point.

"Yes, Masters," the mind-healer said in his high-pitched voice. His nose twitching at random intervals was his only sign of nervousness. Otherwise he stood there calmly and with more than a little confidence. Yoda could feel the mind-healer's anxiety creating waves around him in the Force, despite his inability to either sense or consciously influence it. The sensation, though, was tempered by the drall's determination and certainty concerning the observations he'd come to share.

"We have discussed many of your concerns already, but we wished to hear them from you," Mace said, picking up where Yoda left off. Yoda had outlived many Heads of the Council, but he appreciated each one of them for who they were and Mace was no different. He had a sharp mind and even sharper reactions. He had a natural tendency to pin-point the problematic areas in a proposal or other such issue without much ado. He was terse and strict with both himself and those around him...a little too strict at times, but he was a good man and someone Yoda found himself grateful to have at his side more than once.

"I appreciate your consideration, Masters," the drall said with a slow nod. "Thank you.

"Before we get into a discussion, I would like to reiterate the reason I was brought here. Anakin was not raised as a Jedi and thus he has a completely different thought process than what you or even most of the population here on Courscant is used to. Not only does he have the mind-set of a human raised in a fairly normal familial environment, he also has the thought-processes of a slave.

"If you don't mind, I wish to clarify," he paused and waited politely for a nod from Mace before he continued. "Thank you. A slave mind-set can be many things, but is usually one of deference in the best case scenario. One has little choice but to relent to one's owner and so there is little sense of self. In the worst case scenarios I've come across, the former slaves cannot function in normal Republic society because they have no one to answer to. Fortunately Anakin is a little more rebellious. He hated his slavery and clung to his sense of self.

"That, Masters, is what I would like to discuss first. Please correct me if I am wrong, but from what I have observed of your order, you encourage people to forget themselves—to lose themselves in the service of others. I must say that I find this to be a very positive way of living and I do not wish to degrade this form of encouragement in any way as I have found that when one works to better other's lives, their own lives are often improved. However I believe Anakin is having difficulties with this because his sense of self is what stopped him from becoming a mindless slave with no hopes or dreams for the future. Asking him to give that up before he is ready will only cause friction. He needs to discover who he is and he needs to feel safe before he can begin to focus on others unselfishly."

He paused for a moment and Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke up. "Does he not feel safe here in the Temple?"

Girth shook his head slowly. "I do not believe so and I do not know why. There could be many reasons, but speculating will get us nowhere. All I know is that he has quite suddenly moved to a new lifestyle where his support system, namely his mother, is suddenly gone. He does not know what to do or how to think and he has to get used to a situation he has no idea how to deal with. I know he receives support from his teachers and the other students, but this is not a support he is used to and he won't feel safe in such a system until it has been tested or until he grows used to it.

"Quite frankly, I am pleased and highly impressed that he has made as much progress as he has without the support I would normally expect someone from his background would need."

At that point he stopped for a moment and seemed to gather his thoughts. "The reason I brought this point up first is because everyone is already doing everything they can to fix it. He is seeing mind-healers who can help him realize that he does not have to give up himself to help others. He is an intelligent child and I highly doubt he will fail to reach this conclusion eventually, but I would ask that you be aware of this circumstance as he continues to train in the ways of the Jedi."

The familiar field of emotion arose in the room. Yoda sat back and observed as a general air of approval moved around the circle of Council Members.

"We appreciate you bringing this to our attention," Mace finally said, his tone polite. As Yoda had suspected, they hadn't heard anything they hadn't already known, but in his opinion, it never hurt to be reminded of something important, and that observation definitely qualified. Besides, Girth's explanation had put Initiate Skywalker's general background into perspective and that was something that, in Yoda's opinion, far too few Jedi (even Council members) currently possessed.

"And I thank you for your open-minded acceptance," Girth replied, relaxing ever so slightly. "Secondly, I would like to bring up something that may be somewhat more controversial: his mother." From the way he shifted, Yoda guessed that even he could feel and sense how many of the council seemed to close down at this, but he continued anyway. "As I pointed out before, Anakin's entire support system—I would even go so far as to say his reason to live—consisted of his mother and perhaps a few other enslaved friends. It is little wonder that he is having problems adapting to his new lifestyle when everything he has known (both good and bad) has been taken away."

"You wish for us to allow him to see his mother," Mace pointed out, a frown obvious on his face.

"I do," the being said in confirmation.

"You must understand that there is a reason we cannot allow attachments," Plo koon spoke, not unkindly. Yoda had always appreciated his calm way of standing up for his beliefs and ideals without intruding on another's own thoughts and actions. It was a rare talent and one Yoda had encouraged in the man. It always helped a great deal in meetings like these.

Girth nodded. "Yes, I do." But he disagreed, Yoda could sense it and hear it in the otherwise well disguised voice.

Apparently Adi picked up on that too. "You do not agree."

Diplomatically, the drall shrugged ever so slightly. "Whether I do or not is not the issue at hand. It is a difference in opinion, one that we could debate, but I believe the fact of the matter is that Anakin already has an attachment. It is no longer a matter of him not forming one or even simply dismissing one. He has one (several actually) and he was raised to know that attachment is a positive development. Being told otherwise now is confusing and harmful to his psyche. Until he knows his mother will be taken care of and is no longer in harm's way, I do not believe he will give up the attachment he has to her. Indeed, it will only grow stronger with time.

"Allowing him to contact his mother, even limited access, will give him the peace of mind he needs to continue to improve. It will also return his support system to him and he can then be slowly moved towards independence from his mother if you so wish."

"We cannot encourage him to remain attached," Adi said, her voice firm and unyielding. "Attachments encourage fear. That is the first step down the dark path for a Jedi."

To his credit, Girth didn't back down. "You cannot stop it. It has happened and by cutting him off from his attachment, you are already enabling his fear."

More disapproval from the Council Members, but Yoda could also feel a grudging acknowledgment at the truth of the mind-healer's words. Yoda decided to put a stop to the minor conflict and spoke.

"Consider your words and meditate on this, we will, but our decision you must respect."

The drall nodded again. "Of course, Master Yoda."

Yoda gestured for Girth to go on. "Continue."

"The next issue is something I myself am unsure on and would ask that you keep that in mind. From what I can tell, Anakin is of the opinion that to be a Jedi, he must not have any emotion. Master Xio has informed me that you encourage your students to release extreme emotions to the Force, but I fear that something has been lost in his interpretation of this."

Yoda couldn't help the frown that came to his face. "Sentient beings, we are. Have feelings, we all do. Try to eliminate them, we should not. Control of emotions is what a Jedi should strive for."

He felt agreement from most people but some surprise through the Force from a few of the other beings in the room, which worried him. How many people had interpreted that aspect of the code in that way? Girth, on the other hand, looked nothing short of relieved.

"That brings a great deal of relief to my heart," the mind healer said with a smile. "I believe my method of healing will help him to control his emotions in the long run. You see, it's a matter of basics. He wasn't taught the building blocks and reasons for controlling his emotions, which is why I believe he was having such a hard time. Identifying his emotions and then analyzing them should help in this endeavor.

"In conclusion, Masters, I have to say that while he needs a sense of normalcy in his new life, he cannot be treated like any other Jedi, at least not at the moment. He will need specialized attention until he can act more independently. Slowly giving him more responsibility and showing that you trust him will only encourage his own trust in you." At this, the Drall eyed every Master one at a time. "He wants to change and he wants to heal. In his heart, he wants to help people, but I fear he may have forgotten how to do so. He is a mature, intelligent child who reminds me of a war veteran just as much as he reminds me of a former slave. I don't know what he's been through, but if we want him to heal, we will need to be cautious and careful.

"That is all I have to say, Masters."

"Very well," Mace said sternly. "I will now ask if anyone has questions or a response to anything Healer Girth just said."

One of the council members spoke up for clarification, but Yoda withdrew, keeping half-an-ear out for anything he would have to respond to, but he felt he needed to analyze how he himself had treated the boy. He had tried his hardest to think of Anakin Skywalker as nothing more than another initiate. Each initiate needed care and attention, but Yoda had been determined to not coddle or single-out the boy in any way. He'd felt that that would give the boy the best chance to fit in. Perhaps he'd been wrong though, because when he thought about it, Anakin was most definitely *not* another random Padawan. Not only was he immensely powerful, but he also used to be a Sith Apprentice. Of course, Yoda had only recently had that suspicion confirmed (and he had yet to share that with the rest of the

Council because he knew their reaction would not be favorable towards the boy, and that was the last thing he needed), but they'd known he'd had dark-side training since he'd entered the Temple.

The more Yoda thought about it, the more he realized that Girth was right: Anakin was a special case and needed to be treated as such. If they at the Temple couldn't do that, then they shouldn't have taken Anakin in to begin with. This created a further problem in that turning him away now would only be detrimental to the child and any future relationships he had with the Temple. Besides, it was Yoda's firm belief that because it had been the Temple's choice to keep and train him, they needed to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions and do everything they could to help the boy cope with all of the adaptions that change entailed.

Well, if nothing else, the drall had made him think.

"If there are no more questions or comments," Mace was saying and Yoda pulled his full attention back to the current happenings. "I thank you for bringing your concerns before us today, Healer Girth."

Yoda decided to take that just a step further and acknowledge something that really needed acknowledgment.

"Grateful, we are, that so dedicated you are."

Girth looked torn between being offended and preening at the praise. "It is my job, Master Yoda."

Yoda shook his head. "Above and beyond you have gone and wish to acknowledge this, I do."

At that, Girth finally relaxed and bowed. "Then I humbly accept your acknowledgment."

"Master Xio will show you out," Mace said with a nod to the door.

"Good day, Masters," Girth said, then turned to leave. The Council watched him leave before they opened the discussion. Yoda had a strong suspicion that they would not make any actual decision today and that they would all end up having to meditate on this.

Shifting ever so slightly, he sat back in his chair. This would take a while.

xXx

Anakin Skywalker had always hated waiting. His newly found patience with his progress seemed to be the only aspect of his patience that had improved in the years since his fall to the Dark Side. Well, that and his ability to put up with the other younglings. Tolerating adults or waiting for events to come to pass on the other hand did nothing for his nerves. His stint as Vader had not helped with that particular fault in the least and he suspected that his impulse to demand that he get what he wanted (or felt he deserved) immediately was a good part of the reason why he had originally fallen to the Dark Side and the tendency had only been cultivated afterwords.

So it was with great difficulty that Anakin tried to force the unnerving (downright terrifying if he were honest, but he would never admit it aloud) probable outcomes of Yoda's decision and his next session with D-40 from his head...with little success. Half of him wanted the Grandmaster to acquiesce to his request because he was willing to do just about anything to be rid of his tendency to turn to the darkness. If Girth's suggestions would help, he would gladly follow through with them, no matter how painful...but if he couldn't handle it and fell again during the session, then (especially if Yoda were there) he could at least be consoled with the fact that he wouldn't be the downfall of the Jedi and consequently the Republic this time (no matter how corrupt, just about anything had to be better than the tyrannical rule the Emperor had practiced, even if it *had* brought a sort of twisted, uneasy peace...).

The other half of him wanted to run and hide and pretend that none of this was happening because the thought of having to actually *say* some of his experiences aloud—of making them real and reliving them —scared him almost as badly as the thought of Padme dying again. Sure he could put in the minimal effort with his slave memories which would only result in some discomfort, but if Girth was right (and Anakin had no reason to believe otherwise) then that would scratch the surface of his problems at best. That meant he would have to relive practically his entire life. The very idea made him physically sick. He desperately didn't want to even imagine speaking of the day he'd turned, or the day he'd lost his arm to Dooku, or almost all of the Clone Wars, or when his son had rejected him and proved that he would rather die than join him. Most of his life he just wanted to forget; bury it somewhere far more deeply inside than he had ever ventured before and pretend it didn't exist. The fact that he apparently couldn't if he expected to remain in control had thrown him; had carelessly tossed his plans out the window and completely uprooted any sense of mastery of himself that he'd ever had.

To make matters worse, since his return to the past, he had never felt more lost or alone or uncertain as he did during those hours and days between the session with Girth and the session with Master Xio. Compounding the gut-wrenching terror associated with the prospect of what he would have to do was the fact that he had no doubts Sidious would sense him if he fell or even brushed the Dark Side at all. He'd realized with a sort of half-hysterical mind-set he couldn't seem to break away from that part of him which would rather go into a suicidal battle alone and unarmed over going through what this mind healing entailed.

It was funny in a terrible and ironic kind of way, he had finally begun to acknowledge that the idea of confessing all of his nigh innumerable sins on top of the wrongs done to him filled him with a dread and fear he couldn't imagine ever truly banishing. As a Sith this would have been a giant leap forward, towards becoming the Master of the order as he had essentially discovered a well of emotion deep within himself that would ensure his connection to the Dark Side. Now, though, this realization seemed to place an immovable object in his path, one that he had been trying to skirt around his entire life. Even now, his mind simply seemed to want to shy away from the very idea of speaking about his past. Unfortunately, with the knowledge that in two days, after Master Xio's session, he would almost surely begin doing so, he couldn't seem to brush the idea aside, even temporarily and it left him on edge, jumpy and snappish. The morning after this realization he almost didn't make it through first meal without giving in to his darker tendencies and most of his friends had realized with a rather astounding amount of understanding that even speaking to him was tempting fate.

He went through his classes that day in a sort of tense panic that he could barely hide. He had to forcibly turn his thoughts to something less stressful than what was to come (basically *anything* else) before he could calm his emotions down enough to breathe even somewhat normally. If he hadn't been through Sidious' training methods, he would have called his state of being pure torture.

It helped that he would be talking to an impartial droid that wouldn't judge or pity him, but only marginally. Still, he would take what little reassurance he could give himself because he did not want it from anyone else. The first time around, he would have accepted sympathy at this age—welcomed it, really. Now, though, he didn't want sympathy or empty platitudes or even well-meaning comments and encouragements. He really didn't want to be around anyone, actually, as he didn't want anything from them, positive or negative, because

every comment someone made regarding either his mood or the sessions would drag what he desperately wanted to avoid back to the forefront of his mind.

Even his racing was affected, which took his surprise and frustration to a whole new level because even as Vader that had rarely happened before. He still managed to win one or two, but he noticed that he was taking greater risks than normal as near-death experiences seemed to be the only thing that could demand full attention from the mess that had become his general state of being. Bleersh was not happy, but also seemed to catch onto the fact that if he spoke to Anakin at all, he may not come out of it alive.

The next morning he woke from a restless, fitful sleep feeling worn and tired. Knowing that today would be his session with Master Xio had kept him awake and continually frustrated (downright scared, really), and as a consequence, he walked around in a state of mind he hadn't been in since before he'd come back in time. His mood that day was nothing short of foul and if anyone had so much as said two words to him after the morning meal, he wasn't sure he could keep himself from falling back into his habit of Force-choking people to death. He wasn't even sure he *wanted* to keep himself from doing that at this point...and that scared him more than just about anything else. He had existed in a state of flux that left nothing about his plans or his future sure at all and he could feel his will bending under the pressure. It was all he could do to not draw on the near constant call of the Dark Side that had seemed to gain a level of closeness and temptation. He almost wondered why none of the Masters had swooped down on him yet. The fear that the initiates would exude as he strode past, hands behind his back and an expression on his face that *dared* anyone to test his lack of patience, also did nothing for his mood, but he couldn't seem to bring himself to do anything about it.

Only a few hours before Master Xio's session, he found himself almost wishing for his Sithly reputation, as that was something he knew he could handle. He could take outright ire. That had been one thing his past as a Sith had actually helped with: he was now *very* used to people hating him, although their disdain had almost always been accompanied by fear, which he had hoped to avoid this time around. Now he just couldn't summon the motivation to care about anything and wanted something familiar that he knew he could deal with, for good or ill.

It was strange that as the day wore on, he became more and more emotionally unhinged. Even as a Sith, that happened so rarely that he

just didn't know how to deal with it. It had been another thing being Vader had trained into him, recognizing how deep his passions ran; deeper emotions meant more power to a Sith. He'd never thought the skill of being able to identify such things would come in handy otherwise. He wasn't sure it was coming in handy now as the sheer enormity of the situation he had worked his way into was almost enough to drag his spirit back to the darkness if only because it would be simpler to give up—he couldn't do anything about how overwhelmed he felt anyway, so why fight it? It became harder and harder to summon the goals he was working towards when he thought like this.

He skipped his Force Techniques class. He didn't trust himself to keep control and instead found himself wandering through the Temple.

It came as a bit of a surprise to find that his feet had led him to the healers wing and he stood in front of the entrance for a good twenty minutes just staring in a dazed sort of puzzlement, wondering why he'd come here.

"Initiate Skywalker?" A soft, calm voice broke into his thoughts and he couldn't help jumping as he whirled around. Bant Erin came slowly towards him a wary concern in her eyes that did little to calm Anakin's mind. Still, he couldn't very well do or say anything disrespectful to a senior healer, so he bit his tongue and forced a nod towards her.

She seemed to sense that that was all she would get from him as she continued carefully, putting a smile on her fish-like face.

"Have you come to see Padawan Tachi?"

"No," was all he could manage to say.

"Oh." The healer looked a little disappointed. "That's too bad."

Despite his dark mood, Anakin couldn't help but catch onto the note of worry in her tone as she glanced towards the healer's wing.

"Why?" he asked.

The Mon Calamari shook her head and smiled down at him again. "It's nothing. She...just seemed to have a bit of a relapse today and I thought having someone visit her would help. Unfortunately, Obi-wan has been summoned before the Council to get an assignment and most of her other friends are already out on their own missions.

"Anyway, if you're here you probably have a reason. What can I help you with?"

Anakin frowned. "What do you mean, 'relapse'?"

The healer shook her head with a sigh. "That's something she'd have to tell you herself."

The former Sith glanced back at the healer's wing again and then up at the Mon Calmari Jedi. "Very well, I will see her."

Bant shot him a kind smile. "Don't feel obligated to, Initiate Skywalker. I'll tell her you stopped by though. Now, if you'd like, I will be happy to help you with whatever you need."

"I need nothing," he said almost dismissively. "I simply had some time on my hands and happened to be passing by. You have succeeded in persuading me to visit Padawan Tachi whatever your initial intentions may have been."

Bant's smile faded to a wary confusion as she studied him. "Are you sure?" she asked finally. "Siri may be very different from what you're used to."

No, he wasn't sure, but it was something that could get his mind off of his upcoming session. Besides, he needed to know what sort of a 'relapse' she would fall into and what she would say during something like that. People probably wouldn't believe her if she started ranting about the future, but then again, they might.

The Mon Calamari didn't look too convinced, but she eventually nodded and led him inside the wing.

"Depending on how she acts, we may or may not be able to stay. I haven't seen her this unstable in a while and we have no idea how she may act. If it turns violent, I will ask you to leave. If that happens, I need your word that you will follow my instructions." That had always been one thing he liked about Bant; she could order (and scold) with the best of them but still somehow never made anyone feel looked down on or depreciated in any way.

"I will," he responded simply.

"Very well, then," she said, still sounding somewhat hesitant. Then she turned and began to make her way towards Siri's room. As they walked, Anakin felt a ripple in the Force and concentrated on trying to

figure out what it was. It took him a few moments to realize that it was Siri and he could feel the former knight's uneasiness somehow. It surprised him as to how pronounced and clearly he could sense her now that he thought about it, and he found himself wondering why he hadn't noticed her presence before. Her emotions rolled through the Force in waves that briefly had him curious as to why no one else seemed to be affected by it. He also wondered when she'd gotten so connected to the Force to have this kind of presence.

Before he could contemplate more, though, they reached her room. Bant paused and turned to Anakin, a warm, if worried, smile in place. "Anakin, I'm going to have to ask you to be patient with her. I don't know what kind of a state she's in right now, and while I do think that people visiting her will help, that will only be if you are calm enough, no matter what she says, to allow us to ground her in the here and now."

"I understand," Anakin answered tersely.

"Very well," she said and turned back to the door. "Let me go in and check on her situation first."

She opened the door and stepped inside the room. Anakin caught a glimpse of a figure staring out of the window before Bant stepped in his way.

"Siri?" Bant said softly. The other woman didn't answer, so Bant continued. "Siri, you have a guest today. Isn't that nice?"

Anakin peeked around Bant just in time to see Siri turn from the window. She looked terrible. Her eyes were red and puffy as if from crying and had large bags underneath them, as if she hadn't slept in a very long time. Her skin looked sallow and pale, and the scraggly mess of blond hair did little to help her image. The blood-shot eyes that looked so sunken on her face were dull and lifeless, nothing like the Siri Tachi Anakin had always known.

She sat there, staring at Bant as if trying to make sense of the fact that the healer was addressing her before those eyes slid down to Anakin's stony face and then her eyes widened. Anakin closed his eyes and braced for impact. This wouldn't be good.

"G-get away!" she yelled as she backed towards the corner on the far side of the room.

"Siri," Bant said calmly, keeping her hands in sight, "it's just me and

Anakin. We're not going to hurt you. We came to visit for a while."

"No! Sith! He'll kill us all! He already has and he will again!"

Anakin frowned and his hands clenched tighter behind him. Ironic that he'd almost been wishing for his old reputation earlier.

"Siri, look at us. Take a good long look. We're not going to hurt you. We don't even have any weapons."

"Jedi are never without weapons," Siri shot back. She'd lowered herself into a defensive position that Jedi were usually taught to protect themselves when they had no weapons available.

"Well, at least we're not Sith anymore," Anakin commented dryly. Bant shot him a disapproving look before turning her eyes back to Siri.

"Siri, we're just here to help. If you want us to leave, we will."

"It's so dark," she whispered, suddenly sounding frail. "Dark and cold and twisted and there's no light! Where's the light, Bant? Did he take it all away again?"

Realization lit the Mon Calamari healer's face suddenly and she took a careful step forward. "It's just a vision, Siri. The Jedi are alive and well. You're alive and healing. Whatever you see—whatever you feel—it isn't real. Come back to us, Siri."

"But it happened," she insisted, but her stance wavered as her pleading eyes fixed on Bant. "They all died! You and Master Windu and Master Yoda and...and Obi-wan. It was so cold! Cold and smothering and the warmth was so hard to find...it kept trying to get back to us, but he stopped it!"

With that, she pointed at Anakin who stood as stoically as ever in the doorway, wondering if he really should just leave. His presence was obviously not helping.

"Siri," Bant said again, taking another step forward, "that's just Anakin. You remember, the initiate Obi-wan brought in to meet you?"

"Obi-wan's Padawan," Siri confirmed, eyes switching in confusion between Bant and Anakin.

The healer shook her head. "No, just an initiate Obi-wan knows. He's a friend, remember?"

Siri shook her head violently. "No! He helped destroy everything! He's V—"

Anakin broke in before she could finish that thought. "Luke."

Silence met his proclamation. Bant paused and turned to look at Anakin in puzzlement. Siri seemed to hesitate, standing in her defensive crouch and blinking at him.

"Luke brought the light back, remember?" he asked softly, feeling his own body relax in reaction to the thought, and for the first time since he'd come out of the session two days previous, he felt a light pierce the cloud of darkness that surrounded him.

"Anakin...?" Bant asked slowly. He read the question in her somewhat stunned gaze.

"I had a dream like that," he said quietly. "Everything had grown cold and dark and hard, and I was miserable and didn't even know it; constantly in pain in every way imaginable...but I did nothing to get myself out. Then a light appeared and dragged the warmth back. He chased the darkness away."

Bant's already large eyes had widened even more. "And this 'light's' name was Luke?"

"Yes..." Surprisingly, that had come from Siri. "L...Luke. He...he defeated the darkness."

"It's light now, Siri," Anakin reassured, his voice never wavering.

"But the darkness is still there," the blond woman insisted. "I can feel it."

Anakin nodded and looked away from her for a moment. "Me too, and it will always be there. But it only has power over us if we give in. And we won't." His voice had strengthened with resolve at the end as he met her wide-eyed gaze again. And then, before his eyes, she deflated and collapsed to her knees. Anakin could feel the agitation she'd been making in the Force calm and she had a relieved hand over her heart.

Bant, who had been looking strangely between Anakin and Siri suddenly rushed forward. "Siri!" she said worriedly. "Are you hurt? What's wrong?"

It took the younger woman a moment to answer, but after taking a deep breath, she did so. Looking up at her friend and healer, Siri smiled, wanly but sincerely.

"Bant," she said calmly, eyes clear, "I...I'm okay now. I'm sorry I worried you."

The Mon Calmari looked at her skeptically. "Then tell me your name."

"Siri Tachi."

"Level."

"Padawan."

"Your master?"

"Adi Gallia."

"Where are you right now?"

Siri withheld an obvious snort. "The Jedi Temple, where I have lived all my life. It is occupied by Jedi of all ages, and they are all alive and well, if those were your next questions."

It was really the sarcasm that seemed to convince Bant that Siri had returned to herself.

"I'm so relieved," she said as she put a hand on her patient's shoulders. Then she turned to Anakin. He could see the questions in her eyes, but she did not voice them. Instead, she shot him a huge smile. "Thank you, Anakin. I told you your presence would help."

For once, he couldn't help but think. However, he knew better than to voice the thought aloud and nodded his head in acceptance instead.

"Bant," Siri said, her voice still quiet, but it was no longer shaking.

"Yes?"

Siri looked up at her with a calm expression. "Could you let us talk for a little while? Alone?"

Anakin frowned, wondering why Siri would ask that, but wasn't about to complain as he did have a few things that he wished to discuss with her, like his strange ability to sense her so clearly...

Bant seemed surprised for a moment, but she must have realized that they wished to discuss the proverbial hutt in the room and having her there would just make it awkward. She still appeared to have so many questions, but Bant knew when to back down.

"Of course, but only on the condition that you get back in your bed, and that no arguments occur—or anything else nearly as strenuous for that matter." Her words were cross, but her face practically shown with a relieved warmth.

"You have my word," Anakin said, his face still void of emotion.

"I'll do my best," Siri said begrudgingly.

Bant fixed her stern gaze on the smaller woman. "Promise."

Siri rolled her eyes. "Alright, I promise."

The healer's face broke into another grin and she nodded as she stood, then reached down to offer her hand to Siri, who, surprisingly, took it with only the smallest hesitation. Bant helped her over to the bed and Anakin watched as the healer made sure her patient was situated and comfortable before turning to leave. Before she passed him, she looked over and said softly and sincerely to both of them:

"Please let me know if I can do *anything*, for either of you." Then she was gone, leaving Anakin and Siri alone in a very awkward silence.

Finally Siri sighed. "Are you going to stand there all day or sit down?"

The two chairs in the room had been tipped over at one point or another and so Anakin eyed them carefully before reaching out with the Force and righting one as he walked over to sit down in it. He noticed Siri's scowl and raised an eyebrow; the only question she would get out of him.

"I know you were taught to not use the Force so casually," she said in a tight voice.

Anakin shrugged. He wasn't about to excuse himself. It had been almost subconscious. There had been a few years towards the end of his time as Vader when he'd used the Force for practically everything. It was a bit of a habit that he'd had to try and break, but he'd only done so to keep the other Jedi out of his business and away from him. He didn't really feel like adhering to that particularly limited view point at the moment. He also wasn't about to say that aloud.

"What did you wish to speak on?" he asked, figuring that changing the subject would probably work well for both of them.

Siri huffed but allowed the change. She looked away from him. "I...almost broke my promise, and I think an apology is in order." She said it through gritted teeth, but the fact that she said it at all had Anakin raising his eyebrows. Siri never apologized. She obviously must have had a good reason, although Anakin had only had to cut her off from speaking his Sith name aloud. She hadn't said anything about Palpatine, and as he recalled that was what he had asked her not to speak of. Perhaps she had been contemplating doing so? He didn't say anything and she continued.

"I told you I'd trust you for now but...when I'm in that state, I can't seem to think straight," she said, raising a hand to her head, voice incredibly tight with frustration.

"Then no apology is necessary," he replied. As nice as it was to hear Siri apologize to him, he wasn't about to take advantage of the situation and drive her animosity towards him up even higher. His comment seemed to take her off guard and she looked over to him in surprise. When she didn't say anything, Anakin couldn't help but smirk ever so slightly.

"I'm assuming you never expected to hear such coming from me," he said, unable to keep amusement from his voice (which, he couldn't help but note, was a huge and welcome change from his earlier mood —perhaps coming here had been a good idea after all).

"Well, no," she said honestly.

He waved her admission away with a wave of his hand. "I do not believe that state of mind is anything you can help at the moment."

She caught the hint he'd planted in that and her brow furrowed. "You know something..."

He repressed a sigh. This would not be something he would relish. "I have a theory."

"You'd better explain that," she said shortly.

"You're not going to like it," he warned. "I myself am unsure what to think if my theory is indeed correct." Her lips thinned into a straight line, but she didn't say anything, only tapping one finger against her other arm in impatient agitation. He paused for just a moment before

voicing the opinion he'd just come to: "Siri, I think we have a Force bond."

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'd like to say that my writer's block is gone, but I don't want to jinx myself. . . . Still having issues with my Leia fic, but it's coming along much faster! :D Dark Obi-wan fic is also coming along nicely. You guys may want to check it out: Setting the Future Alight (although I'm thinking about changing it to either 'Set it Alight' or 'Setting it Alight'-although if you guys have any suggestions for a better title, I'm open).

So, about Siri and Anakin's Force Bond, NO this will not be an AnakinxSiri fic. I did some reading up on Force bonds and they tend to develop when people feel strongly towards another person. For the bond to be broken, one of the people would have to change their feelings and thoughts (hence the reason why Anakin can feel Sidious and visa versa when he's in dark-side mode, but is able to feel Obi-wan, Siri and Ahsoka in light-side mode-it's also why Anakin and Obi-wan's Force bond (while there) is different from canon). I'll probably explain this in story too, but I wanted to assure people that I do not, as of yet, have any pairings in this story that have not already been mentioned.

Anyway, you guys don't know how amazing batfan7 was in helping me out here! Gah, I was SOO lucky to get her as a beta! 3

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Siri just stared at him for several seconds before the complicated emotions began to pass over her face.

"What?!" she hissed, probably because if she'd said it any louder, Bant would likely hear and come running.

It was Anakin's turn to look away. "You woke that night because I was able to act as a conduit between your future self and your past self. As such, I saw—lived to an extent—many of your memories."

And there was the scandalized look he'd been expecting.

"I did not mean to," he said, making sure he sounded as unhurried and calm as normal. It was all she would get when it came to placation. He never had been good at setting other people at ease, so he figured that he would simply explain the truth and let her come to her own conclusions...and somehow find a way to deal with the potentially dire consequences when they came. "Because this happened I can now empathize with you in a way I could not previously. Then there is also the fact that you and I are the only two people who have traveled back from the future." He stopped and met her darkening expression curiously. "Speaking of, do you remember how you did?"

"How I did what?" she asked snappishly, but with just the right amount of confusion too. If he kept her off balance then perhaps she would calm down before she could yell at him, and he would get answers that could lend credibility to or disprove his theory.

"How you came back with me."

She frowned, this time in contemplation. "Not really. I just remember that I couldn't lose you, so I kept track of your Force signature and followed as best I could."

He nodded again. "So you were attuned to me for a rather long period of time," he said thoughtfully.

She blinked. "Yes."

"Which supports my theory," he said satisfactorily.

He wasn't sure if he should be amused or offended at her sick expression. She didn't speak, and he suspected she was trying to find some way to refute his words. Seeing as she didn't even open her mouth, though, she could see the sense in what he said. He hoped she would be able to continue to do so. He had one more point to make...one that she would like even less than the Force Bond's existence in and of itself.

"I also believe," he said, his voice soft, "that my own state of being may be affecting you."

He could quite literally feel her temper and horror rise. "What do you mean?" she asked, somehow still controlling her voice despite the rejection he could feel coming from her.

He couldn't meet her eyes. "It would stand to reason that if we share a bond and are somehow tied through the Force that my severe anxiety from earlier was influencing your state of mind. It would not be the first time since I woke in this time that I have had problems with my emotions, and it is not the first time you have had a 'relapse'. I simply asked myself why you might have such a severe problem when you had been previously improving. Then I noticed that this seemed to occur when I had been having such a difficult time controlling my own emotions and actions. I do not believe in coincidence."

She looked, for all the world, like she wanted to be angry—very angry—at him, but he could also see her working through everything that had happened and his theories. His respect for her grew a few notches and he was very pleased to see that her nigh-legendary control was indeed returning. Finally she spoke through gritted teeth.

"You're saying your mood put me in that...awful state?" She must have said that for lack of a better term.

"Completely unintentionally," he assured her. Then his voice quieted as he continued. "You must admit, it would explain a great deal."

They sat in silence for several minutes. He could tell she needed time to contemplate this new information and come to terms with it. He actually needed a bit of processing time as well.

After what seemed like forever, she finally spoke, her voice strained but otherwise calm and controlled. "Fine. Until we have a better theory, let's assume yours is right. So what do we do about it?"

Anakin felt his brow furrow ever so slightly in confusion. "Why should we do anything about it?"

She turned a mildly incredulous look to him. "You actually *want* to be connected through the Force? I mean, we don't even know what type of a bond it is! Is it similar to a training bond? Or is it simply emotional? Or is it something completely new? How will this affect us?"

He chuckled mirthlessly at her tone, but shrugged. "I can only guess but I know little more than yourself and what we have already learned of Force Bonds. However, I believe the benefits of such a connection could outweigh the costs."

"How?" she asked dryly, folding her arms in front of her stubbornly.

He refrained from rolling his eyes, although barely. "For one thing, I will know if something undesirable happens to you."

"You mean like today?" she shot back. He frowned at her, but ignored her comment and continued anyway.

"And this will make it easier for you to keep track of my own mental status."

She contemplated that for a few seconds before eying him curiously, most traces of anger having melted from her features. "Explain."

Anakin sighed. "If our bond follows, even remotely, the basic structure of a normal Force Bond—and we have no reason to believe otherwise at the moment—then in the case that you cannot sense me through the bond, my outlook and feelings will have...changed," he said, trying to ignore his discomfort at having to explain this.

Siri blinked for a few moments before her eyes widened in realization. "You mean, you'll have turned again?" she asked a little too dryly.

The former Sith frowned at her bluntness. "I'm sure there are other instances where such a case could occur, but essentially, yes."

She was silent for several more seconds before she sighed and looked over at Anakin. "I'm still not happy about this, for the record."

"Duly noted."

"But seeing as we can't really do anything about it, I suppose we

should take advantage of it," she muttered.

Anakin nodded in agreement. "Also," he added after a second, "it could help you regain your previous level of physical ability more quickly."

Her eyes narrowed and he had to make an effort to not shift in his seat. "So it's like a training bond?"

Anakin frowned and wanted to know why in the Galaxy she thought he knew. Force bonds were tricky things in the fact that no two were ever alike, at least in theory, because no two Jedi were ever the same. A few bonds could be forged on purpose, like training bonds and, thousands of years ago, when Jedi were still allowed to marry, marriage bonds. Other bonds were less predictable and could potentially develop at any point between any two people who happened to relate to each other and spent any amount of time around each other. Some Jedi could go through their entire lives without forging a bond, while others would develop multiple bonds with many of their comrades on a regular basis.

The depth of the bond could range anywhere from a vague awareness to near telepathy when in closer proximity. Sometimes they made missions easier, sometimes they made missions far more difficult (as Anakin had found out the hard way with Obi-wan). The only thing about Force bonds that tended to be predictable was the ability to break them. Purposefully forged bonds could usually be broken by a third party if they knew how to manipulate the Force and knew the two who were bonded well enough. Natural bonds, though, were much harder to break.

The reason that a bond was formed between a master and a padawan was so the Master could guide their student more easily in the Force and teach and train with more empathy and understanding. So, while Anakin and Siri's bond was not in any way purposeful, it could be used as a sort of training bond if she really wished, he supposed. Anakin hadn't tested the bond yet after all. It had been subtle, but there, just waiting to be noticed, but he hadn't figured out the nature of it yet. Unlike his bond with Obi-wan, this one had almost no emotions attached to it, which was what made it so unusual.

"No," Anakin finally answered, figuring he should stick to the spirit of the question instead of focusing on the details. "I do not know more about the nature of this bond yet as I only just noticed it myself, but I do not believe it is like a training bond. It is far more elusive. I was merely putting forth possibilities."

Siri's mouth thinned, but she didn't raise an argument. Instead, she sighed. "Very well," she said and didn't speak further on the subject.

They sat there in an uncomfortable silence for several more seconds before Siri turned to Anakin, eyes tired. "I don't mean to sound rude, but there isn't much more we can discuss for the moment. Could you please leave?"

Anakin rolled his eyes at her rather blunt comment, but he could see why she'd said it, so he slid off of his chair and began to stride towards the door.

"Anakin..." To his surprise, Siri's voice stopped him before he'd reached the exit. He turned to look at her inquisitively. "If your mood is influencing me, then you have to be careful. I don't want to go back to...*that* again." Somehow, he knew she'd suppressed a shudder.

He could understand her better than she realized, he suspected. After the slightest hesitation, Anakin nodded. "I will keep that in mind. Sleep well."

"Yeah, thanks," she said and almost sounded sincere.

xXx

Tai'k Xio had been a confident woman for decades. It was no secret among those she knew that she tended to be sure of herself because she knew what she spoke of and sported an excellent memory. It wasn't difficult to bring her (not inconsiderable) experience to mind in many situations and draw conclusions from her own memories, and they were usually quite helpful and correct. That hadn't changed, but her confidence had still been shaken.

Perhaps she had grown too complacent and too fixed in her ways because the meeting she'd had the previous day with Healer Girth and the Jedi Council had planted more than a few seeds of doubt in her mind about more than one thing—not the least of which was her own view of the Universe. She had helped many Jedi with their problems in her life, but she had known from the beginning that this one—that Anakin Skywalker—would be different from any other problem she had approached. That was why she'd suggested bringing in a non-sensitive mind healer to help. The Council had been more than a little surprised by her suggestion, but after looking over the young initiate's case, she had known that there would be problems she could not address properly as she simply did not have the background or personal experience that would help her relate to the boy.

The Force nudging her in that direction had helped a bit there too.

Still, she'd been fairly sure that after a few months, Anakin would begin to understand the Jedi; to see how they were expected to act, and he would begin to adjust accordingly. Now, she wasn't so sure. Truthfully, she hadn't realized just how removed from the normal life of a non-sensitive she had been...and she'd begun to think that perhaps the Jedi as a whole had the same problem. She hadn't yet had time to really contemplate the implications of that realization, but she knew that her experiences with Anakin and Girth had changed her life and her view point.

With that new thought on her mind, Tai'k began to truly comprehend just how ill-prepared she was to really help Anakin. Yes, she could answer questions about the Force and she still had every intention of helping him through whatever mental block he'd created for himself when it came to that, but she was not, in any way, sure about how much she could help him in and above that. Perhaps Girth would be a Jedi Consultant for far longer than they had all anticipated.

With a shake of her head, she turned her thoughts away from what might be to what she could affect; namely, Anakin's current treatment. Speaking with Master Yaddle a few days before had been how she'd taken her suspicions that Anakin had subconsciously blocked himself from at least some aspects of the Force to an all-out conclusion. The diminutive Master hadn't actually spoken of any details, but what she had said supported her theory that Anakin did not trust the Force or the Jedi. He had somehow become severely jaded, and it was stunting his ability to learn. If he were to grow—both as a Jedi and a person—he would have to overcome that. She suspected that his darker training had a lot to do with it.

In addition to all of that, Girth had proclaimed that Anakin did not even feel safe at the Temple. That had caused her to realize just how her general plan for him at the moment would be pushing too far too fast. She knew he didn't trust her, but that wasn't exactly unusual for her patients. Many Jedi didn't like coming to a mind healer. However, not trusting her because she was a stranger and a therapist, and not trusting any Jedi because they were Jedi were two entirely different situations. Unfortunately, the latter was far more severe and far less common.

Tai'k had also appreciated her fellow healer's assertion that Anakin needed a support structure. She agreed wholeheartedly. She simply hadn't realized that, at the moment, he had none. If he didn't trust

Jedi, then he was surrounded by people he felt he couldn't trust. Not exactly the most ideal situation.

However, the biggest problem, to her mind, stemmed from the fact that she hadn't seen all of this when she *should* have. Even now she kicked herself often for overlooking these small but vital pieces of information. For instance, when it came to the support structure, she'd assumed that because he'd made a few friends that he was warming up to the Jedi. Now she wasn't so sure. Also, he only seemed to be interested in making contacts within his age group. Admittedly he also had Knight Kenobi and Padawan Tachi, but he didn't see them on a regular basis, and both had rather large problems of their own at the moment (she knew Knight Kenobi was struggling to release his Master's death, and while she had no doubt he would eventually be able to, he did not have the mental stability to really support anyone else currently, and Padawan Tachi...well, the healers were still concerned with her general mental state). He had similar relations to the Jedi Masters and Knights that taught him, as well as Masters Yoda and Yaddle. And that was it. She and Healer Girth didn't have the history for Anakin to really rely on them yet and as far as she knew, there was no one else. Most people could not even begin to change and heal as he had in situations half as harsh. Girth had been correct in stating that Anakin's improvement was nothing short of a miracle. He really was an exceptional child.

After the meeting, she had reevaluated her entire plan and healing-structure with new eyes, quickly finding many areas where even her adjusted methods would be moving far too quickly because many conclusions that any normal initiate would naturally come to simply could not be expected of Anakin.

And so she had come up with something extremely different for her session with Anakin today. It was something that she may not normally even support as she was afraid she was encouraging attachment, but he needed a support system, and that included not only people he could rely on, but people who could rely on him. She'd actually set this up with the comment he'd made about how he'd returned to the light because of his connection to the people he cared for in mind. It was the only reason she'd even considered going through with her idea to begin with.

She really hoped she wasn't making a very large mistake here. However, this was uncharted territory, and long years had taught her that she really could only do her best when blazing a trail, whether physical or metaphorical. If her best wasn't good enough, then she

would have to resort to something else. Perhaps she would meet with Healer Girth again after he returned from his home planet in a couple of days. It wouldn't be part of their normal meeting schedule, but her new observations needed to be addressed, and who better to ask than her fellow mind-healer?

A small chime sounded, bringing her out of her thoughts. Realizing what time it was, she began to make preparations for the session. It was a little earlier than she normally started, but she had to make a stop today...

xXx

To say that Anakin was feeling better after his discussion with Siri would be a mild understatement. That didn't mean he'd reached a point of complete calm. Hawk-bats still churned his stomach and he still clutched his wrist in his hand behind his back, walking with a firm, straight-backed posture that he simply couldn't bring himself to lose at the moment, but he could at least put forth an exterior picture of control. It gave him the air of confidence he needed to continue down that thrice-cursed hallway towards a door he still did not want to think about. He refused to allow himself to slow at all, fearing that if he did, he may not be able to force himself onwards—to what his mind had begun to recognize as certain doom.

Obi-wan had always said he'd had a flair for the dramatic.

With an inward sigh, Anakin wrenched his mind away from that train of thought and made himself reach out towards the door, knocking lightly. Somehow, he managed to continue standing there for the few seconds it took for Master Xio to open the door.

"Welcome back, Anakin," she said with that warm smile of hers after the door had slid aside.

"Master Xio," he said with a slight bow and a toneless voice. It would be the best he could do at the moment. He'd been doing so well after he'd left the healer's wing, but every step towards this room had only brought his anxiety back. He wasn't on the verge of Force-choking anyone, but he still did not want to be there.

"Come in," she said, stepping aside and ushering him through the portal. "Have a seat."

His only acknowledgment came in the form of him lowering his body to the edge of one of the arm chairs.

"Now I know you've been rather nervous about today," she commented lightly as she too took her seat. Anakin had a very difficult time repressing a snort at her understatement. "However, we still have a session to get through before we come to your session with D-40, and I would like for you to try and focus on that."

For a moment, Anakin felt dread freeze his veins before he was able to calm himself down and release everything to the Force. Not only did he have his confession to 'look forward' to, but he had to endure another hour before hand? And not just any hour, but one of the sessions with Master Xio and her rather frightening ability to jump to the right conclusions...

He closed his eyes and used his calming techniques. They helped to take the edge off of his panic and he was able to answer in a smooth voice.

"Very well, Master Xio," he said in monotone. "What do you wish to speak of today?"

How had he gotten that out without squeaking? And his lack of courage was seriously starting to get on his nerves.

"Well, I'd like to talk a little more about your decision to come to the Jedi temple," she said slowly and with an easy, almost lilting tone. "Why did you decide to come here?"

Again, Anakin had to force himself to not snort derisively. "I would think that was obvious," he stated rather blandly.

Master Xio didn't look fazed by his less-than-enthusiastic response. "Nevertheless, I'd like you to go through all of your reasoning for me, if you could."

He allowed himself the luxury of a small eye roll and fell back on what was more or less becoming a chant in his head—keep the mind-healer happy and the Jedi Council would continue to observe and not interfere with him and his plans. Happy mind-healer, happy Council. Happy mind-healer, happy Council.

"First and foremost, I did not want to remain a slave," he said after a few seconds.

"Unsurprising and completely understandable," the older Jedi said with an acknowledging nod of her head. "But after being freed, you could have remained on Tatooine with your mother. Why even leave

her?"

Obi-wan had given Anakin the 'are you serious because that really has the most obvious answer in the galaxy' look so many times that the former Sith had vowed—years ago—that he would never, in turn, give it to anyone. As Anakin, he had lived by that rule. As Vader, he hadn't really had the opportunity to break it. Right now, though, he had to fight to keep it off of his face. His expression was already dry enough as it was.

"As a child who used to be a slave on a Hutt-owned planet with no one but other slaves as support? Honestly leaving was my only option if I did not wish to run the risk of being enslaved again."

She tapped her chin with one of her fingers thoughtfully. "I see your point. But then,why the Jedi?"

At this Anakin snorted softly and looked away. "What child has not heard of the Jedi—the heroes of the Galaxy, the peacekeepers that everyone looks up to and listens to. I honestly thought they had the power to do anything—and I would have given anything for that power."

Master Xio's brow furrowed in a slight frown. "But Jedi do not seek power. Surely you knew this before coming."

Anakin had known more than a few Jedi who did indeed seek power, but he really didn't want to get into semantics at the moment. "I didn't understand," he said finally. "I didn't really comprehend what I craved above freedom and the ability to help others."

"You speak as if that has changed."

Anakin's eyes fell ever so slightly as a sad acceptance welled inside of him. "Now I just wish to prevent evil from destroying the galaxy. I was given light back after knowing darkness for so long, and I wish to give that to other people, even if they do not realize that that is what I am offering. There are so many innocent people who deserve the chance to live..." Like Padmé. Like Ahsoka and Luke and his daughter and how many countless other people that he and the Emperor had practically destroyed?

"That is very noble of you, Anakin," she said, her voice nothing if not sincere. "And more mature than many people several times your age. Thinking of others like that is what Jedi ideally strive for. So maybe you fit in around here more than you think."

He nodded his acceptance of her statement (even if he couldn't quite believe her himself), but didn't trust himself to say anything more at the moment.

"You're already someone that others in your age group look up to. Speaking of, though, I have noticed that you don't really have many acquaintances outside of your age group."

Anakin blinked at the rather strange turn of the conversation and watched as Master Xio rose and walked over to one of the doors. "I know this may seem rather sudden, but I would very much like to remedy that."

The younger Jedi frowned. "What?"

Master Xio smiled knowingly at him (a smile that very nearly drove him mad every time he saw it because it was such an Obi-wan smile...) before turning to the door and opening it.

"D-40, could you bring our guest out here?"

Anakin wasn't quite sure what to think, but mentioning the droid brought up the unpleasant reminder of what he would likely be doing very soon while simultaneously peaking his curiosity. Just when he was off kilter enough to not be able to focus and see if he knew the person. Of course.

"Master Xio," the female voice of the droid said from the other room. "I really must object. This goes far outside my programming!"

Anakin cringed at the words. Perhaps he'd been relying a little too much on what he could remember of C3P0's programming. She was starting to sound like that old, prissy protocol droid.

"I think you adapted rather well, considering the circumstance," Master Xio said with no small amount of amusement in her voice.

"Adapted well?" the droid asked disbelievingly, "There is no possible way in this universe or the next that this...*situation* could be considered anything I could 'adapt' to!"

"Then perhaps we will have to take a look at your programming and see if we can't put in a code that will help next time." The older master still seemed entirely too entertained. For some reason, it was driving Anakin's curiosity up while simultaneously calming his ruffled nerves.

Anakin paused and thought about that for a moment. Perhaps he wasn't giving her the credit she deserved after all.

"There you are, dear," the master said after a few seconds of silence. It took every ounce of control Anakin possessed to stay seated and not get up to go run and see what she was talking about. He would find out soon enough, after all. "Come in."

"Thank you, Master," a subdued, high-pitched voice replied. Anakin did turn at that and peered behind the seat, no longer caring if that made him seem young and undignified. What he saw seemed to shoot the world around him into slow motion.

"*I won't leave you. Not again!" His breath caught in his throat as he remembered blue eyes that seemed so defiant and yet resigned, as if she'd known...*

"You're welcome, young one," Master Xio said as she lead a familiar little girl past. Anakin's gaze followed them and he stared in blatant surprise (while struggling to hide the horror that crept into his expression, and feared that he really hadn't succeeded) at the two Jedi as they stopped where they could easily see Anakin. He sat back, eyes still wide with unhidden emotion.

"*Then you will die!" Red blade meeting white ones—a far too accurate illustration for the situation as it had been at the time...*

"Anakin, meet one of our newest initiates. Next week I will arrange for another Jedi to come in some time during our session and I would like for you to write down some questions that you would like to ask an older Jedi, but for now..." she trailed off and nudged the little girl forward. "Introduce yourself, young one."

It took every ounce of Anakin's will to continue to breathe past the guilt. He couldn't take his eyes off of her and only seemed to be able to think "I killed her" in his head over and over again. His own apprentice and he'd actively sought to destroy her for no other reason than that she had opposed the Empire. Simply because she wouldn't join him...

He forced his thoughts away from that line of thinking and tried to bring them back to the reason why Master Xio had done this at all. Not only was it extremely unexpected (and somehow he felt there was more to it than met the eye) but why had the Master chosen to introduce him to the one youngling he'd actually had a close connection to in his past. It had to be the Force at work...but why?

Simply to dredge up his pain and throw it in his face?

The girl looked uncertainly up at the Jedi Master before looking back at Anakin, then up at the Master again.

"But he's scary," she said, not at all shy. She didn't sound scared either...more upset, now that he thought about it. Typical Ahsoka. Force he'd missed that...

"Why would you say that?" the older woman asked in surprise.

The little girl looked down and shrugged. "He just is."

"Maybe he won't be scary when you get to know him."

She frowned and folded her arms. "No."

She said the word with such conviction that Anakin couldn't help it, he actually chuckled. It seemed to break the lump of ice that had been building inside his chest cavity somewhere. The other two paused and looked at him. He somehow managed to smirk down at the little girl.

"Are all togrutas as snippy as you?"

Ahsoka's frown grew more pronounced.

"I'm not!"

Anakin raised one eyebrow in question, never once losing his smirk. "Oh really, Snips?"

The girl stamped her foot. "That's not my name! It's Ahsoka! Ah-so-kah! Get it?!"

"Ahsoka Tano," Master Xio said disapprovingly, causing the little girl to cringe and back away in shame. "That is no way for a Jedi initiate to act!"

"Sorry, Master," she said softly.

"I don't think I'm the one you need to apologize to."

The scandalized expression on the four-year-old's face almost caused Anakin to burst into outright laughter—no small feat in his mood. He managed, however, to keep his face straight as she turned to him and said, quite grudgingly:

"I'm sorry I got upset...uh..."

"Anakin," he replied. "Anakin Skywalker. You can call me 'Skyguy' though, if you want."

She made a face at that. "Why would I call you that?"

He really couldn't help it if his smile seemed more than a little nostalgic. "No reason."

Ahsoka folded her arms in front of her. "I don't like you."

"Ahsoka!"

She immediately looked down. "Sorry," she muttered again.

"Don't be," Anakin said.

The girl looked up and Anakin ignored Master Xio's frown in his direction. He continued, looking directly into her large, ice-blue eyes. "Never apologize for speaking the truth. Just learn when it is a good idea to voice such thoughts."

The little girl's brow furrowed and she looked like she was concentrating hard on something. After a moment she tipped her head at him.

"Okay."

He nodded firmly. "Good."

And then she did something neither of the older Jedi were expecting. She walked over to the chair and held out her arms in the universal gesture that signaled she wanted to be picked up. Anakin managed to overcome his shock enough to reach down and pull her (surprisingly heavy) form into the chair next to him.

"I thought I was scary," he said after she'd situated herself next to him.

"Sometimes," she replied without a pause. "It's scary 'cause it's cold."

Anakin's heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"Sometimes you're cold here," she said, putting her hand up to lay on his chest. "But you're not cold now, so it's okay. I kiss it better?"

The room fell into a very heavy silence as the two Jedi stared at the

little girl who seemed content to sit still, as almost any Jedi youngling would, looking up imploringly at Anakin. He couldn't begin to imagine where she'd learned the idea of 'kissing it better' because that was most definitely *not* a Jedi practice. Perhaps something she still remembered from her life before she'd come to the Temple? Although, hadn't she come from a harsher background? Anakin couldn't quite recall, it had simply been too long.

"I don't think you can kiss it better," he said gently. She really was advanced for her age if she could make him forget he was talking to a three year old. Until she'd asked if she could kiss it better, he really had seen his old, snippy padawan in place of the child.

"Why not?" she demanded.

He smiled sadly and shook his head. "Why don't you ask me that again in a few years. I'll be able to explain it then."

"Why not now?" she asked with a pout.

"Because I don't want to scare you, and telling you about it might make it cold again. Do you want that?"

She didn't seem happy, but finally shook her head. "No. I don't like it."

"Me neither," he confirmed and glanced over at Master Xio who was watching with an unreadable expression. It made him a little uncomfortable. Still, she hadn't actually stopped them, so, no matter how blank she looked, he decided that he liked having Ahsoka back and had no problems continuing to speak with her like this, no matter her age.

He didn't realize just how much he'd relaxed, nor did he realize that he was no longer focusing on the upcoming session with D-40.

xXx

Master Xio knew that children tended to be unpredictable at best and that Anakin took that concept to new heights, and yet she still had difficulty comprehending what she saw before her. At first she had thought that bringing someone Anakin might be more inclined to be open towards, the little girl who had captured his attention the week before, had been a mistake. She'd been openly wary of Anakin and seemingly closed towards any sort of relationship with him.

Then, with a few well-placed words that she was surprised *anyone*

could pull out, he had acknowledged the girl's aversion, addressed it and alleviated it. He hadn't made any promises or even openly voiced reassurance, but he had somehow worked past the girl's wariness. After Ahsoka's first thoughts, the older Jedi hadn't even expected to be able to get the two to be able to speak at all, let alone see the girl suddenly change her mind and decide she wanted to sit in such close quarters with the boy she had not wanted to be acquainted with not moments before.

Children were supposed to have *simpler* minds than adults, she almost wailed to herself silently. Then she took a deep breath, released her frustration to the Force and settled into her own chair as she watched the two converse.

Ahsoka, it seemed, couldn't stop talking or asking questions:

"What clan are you from?

"The Thranta Clan."

"How is it different from the Clawmouse Clan?"

A light chuckle. "I've never been in the Clawmouse clan, so I couldn't say."

"Oh. What do you have to do then?"

"The same thing you'll have to do: take classes and prepare for becoming a Padawan and later a Knight."

"Oh. You're going to be a Padawan soon, right?"

"I'd like to think so."

"But you don't know?"

A smile that seemed so strangely out of place on any child's face. He did that so often. "No."

"Oh. When did you get your lightsaber?"

"I don't have one yet."

"Why not?"

A sigh, but not an impatient one, surprisingly. "I came to the Temple after the latest Gathering."

"But you're older than me! I was almost too old..."

This time a sad smile. "Yes. Initiates like me would have a hard time catching up with the other students."

A small, thoughtful pause. "But you can do it 'cause you're old."

A wry chuckle. "Something to that affect."

"When will you get your lightsaber?"

He shrugged. "When I prove I can handle one, I guess."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know."

"Oh."

She found it fascinating that their interaction seemed so smooth and easy, not something the mind healer had expected from either Anakin or Ahsoka, especially after Ahsoka's initial reaction. Oh, she'd anticipated that they would eventually come to terms with each other, but she did not believe she could have anticipated this level of camaraderie.

She also noted how Anakin treated the little girl, like she was something very unique and precious, but not fragile. He answered all of her questions with a patience she didn't see in many adults three times his age. It painted a strange picture as he seemed so childishly impatient according to other reports.

Fortunately, the waves of nervousness he had been containing (with only moderate success) when he'd entered had almost completely calmed now. If this was the affect children had on him, then perhaps putting him in charge some of the younger classes under an older knight might be a good idea. She would have to discuss this with Master Yoda and see what he thought. It certainly made for an interesting idea.

She continued to watch the two interact for a while longer, not realizing how peaceful and *right* everything felt until she caught herself smiling softly, the motion completely subconscious. When she did catch herself, she couldn't help but blink in surprise. She reached out to the Force and found herself shocked at how utterly warm and *approving* it felt. It seemed to pulse around Anakin and Ahsoka in a

way she hadn't ever observed before. It was subtle, but it was there.

As quietly and unobtrusively as she could, she called her datapad to her with the Force, not wanting to disturb the scene. Anakin glanced at her once, one eyebrow raised in question, but then he focused back on Ahsoka. Quickly she wrote down everything she could observe as best she could along with a list of impressions she got from the scene. It would definitely be something she would go over later. For now, though, she sat back and continued to watch.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Not very happy with this chapter. I kind of feel like nothing happens, but this is important for later in the story, so yeah.

I had to bring Ahsoka in. In my opinion, she's one of the best characters to come out of the SW franchise and rates just under Obi-wan on my favorite character list. For those of you who don't like her, don't worry, she won't be a huge part of the story. The really main point I wanted to make in this chapter is how much Anakin is forcing the Jedi to change. People are starting to see that perhaps just being stuck in their ways and using the code as a law isn't the answer to everything.

As for how long this took, well, you'll probably have to wait that long for chapters now. I'm sorry, guys, but my muses are working overtime on my dark!Obi-wan story, and even that one hasn't been updated in a while because I now go to school from 8-5, I have an hour drive to GET to (and from) school and I have a job. Writing time is scarce, and it's really getting to me. I want to write, but just don't have time. *sigh*

Oh, on a side note, someone I think I blocked left a comment with a lot of swearing as a guest. I was going to say something refuting what they said...but I forgot what they said and what I was going to say. ^^; Guess it wasn't that important and I don't want to waste time looking it up. Eh, it doesn't matter. I don't care to listen to flamers like that anyway. I want to say, though, that the rest of you guys are awesome! 3 Even when you criticize, you do so in a positive manner and I can't help but appreciate that! I love constructive criticism, really! So thanks!

And finally, revamped to comply with Rebel's canon.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> Alright, I owe you guys an explanation. You'll get it at the end of the chapter. If you don't care, just skip it. Believe it or not, I answer actual questions in a lot of the Authors notes.
>
> Anyway, story summary for those of you who need it (skip it if you don't):
>
> Due to Obi-wan, Anakin went back in time after he'd turned back from the dark side (Return of the Jedi). He decided that keeping some control over the events of the future would serve his purposes best and (reluctantly) rejoined the Jedi Order. Because of his dark training, the Council decided to keep him there so as to watch him better, so even though Qui-gon died, Anakin wasn't apprenticed to Obi-wan. He's gained the suspicion of just about everyone there, though. He also found out that a former Jedi colleague from the future, Siri Tachi, has come to the past as well and merged with her younger self. Now he's going through therapy, trying to fix the future, keeping an eye on Dooku, freeing slaves, racing circuits to gather money, trying to dodge Palpatine (who knows that Vader exists, but doesn't know who he is) and generally trying to make the future a better place all while trying to avoid suspicion. It hasn't been working too well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time flew by and Anakin didn't realize how long they'd been talking until master Xio interrupted them, although she did seem rather reluctant to do so (Anakin didn't quite know what to make of that). She informed them that Ahsoka had to be somewhere and that the session was over and if Anakin wished to speak with her further he could do so at a later date.

That was when he realized that Ahsoka's mere presence had done what nothing else could; she had given him a very welcome reprieve. The problem with reprieves was the fact that they only delayed the inevitable. He found it amazing that he'd almost forgotten that this pleasantness—this break from reality—would have to end.

He forced a smile for the youngling as Master Xio led her to the door. She glanced uneasily back at him just before she disappeared through

the entrance and went with someone Anakin didn't know but could sense on the other side. He berated himself for getting so lost in memories and nostalgia that he hadn't felt anyone coming.

His former (future?) apprentice's expression did nothing to help the Tatooine sandstorms that had suddenly decided to attack his innards.

When Master Xio returned, Anakin tried his best to keep his smile or, bar that, at least a neutral expression, but was fairly certain that he failed at fooling her as she quite suddenly seemed to want to treat him like he would break at any moment. Of course, the way he felt, she probably wasn't that far off. Not that he would ever admit it.

"Anakin, I know you've been worried about your session with D-40 this week, but I want you to know that I'll be right here," she said sincerely, more than a little worry peeking through her tone. The raging sandstorms suddenly turned into terrible, black holes.

"Master Yoda won't be here?" he asked.

He spoke the words, and somehow they just made him feel even worse. As understanding flooded him, he could swear his heart froze solid. It felt as though his lungs had suddenly forgotten how to work, and he struggled to draw breath. For a moment, he had a flashback to his Qabbrat. All too clearly, he could remember trying to get used to breathing normal air again and how much just filling his lungs had *hurt*. In that second, he could have sworn he needed that awful life support suit again.

"Anakin," the older woman said anxiously. "Anakin, breathe."

Just as his mind tried to comprehend the command, a new voice spoke. The familiar tone, and the words that it spoke somehow managed to break through the haze of panic.

"Worried, you were, that come, I would not?"

Anakin felt his entire body relax as a knot seemed to unravel in his chest. He worked to remind himself how to breathe normally until his breaths stopped coming in quick, short gasps. After a few moments, he managed to regain some control of himself and turned his head to take in the short, wizened form that hobbled across the room to meet him. He didn't even care that his relief shone plane on his face.

"Hmm, see I do that true, it is." The Master stopped a few feet away from the room's other occupants, a blank expression on his face as he

put both hands on the staff he planted in front of him, and yet he seemed mildly disapproving anyway.

"You never confirmed it," Anakin muttered, still trying to get his heart rate to slow down.

"Have more faith in us, you should." The master's eyes seemed to pierce through him.

'Us' being the Jedi, or the adults, or just the people around him in general? Gah! Yoda could be so frustratingly vague.

"I'm trying, Master," he muttered the words under his breath, but of course the ancient master picked up on them.

Yoda gave him a chastening glance, "Try not, Initiate. Do, or do not. There is no try."

Anakin struggled to force down the frustration that arose upon hearing the familiar phrase. When he replied, he leveled the small master with a focused glare. "I appreciate the sentiment, Master, but I cannot agree. One will never succeed if they do not try, and sometimes trying is all one can ask of a sentient."

"Hmm. Perhaps," the small, troll-like being said thoughtfully. "But if only try, someone does, give themselves a way out, they do."

"Which only frustrates people who consistently fail," Anakin countered without hesitation, his certainty about the subject clear in his tone. "If they don't succeed in their attempts, then why should they continue to waste time not succeeding?"

Yoda cocked his head as he looked up at Anakin. "Thought about this a great deal, you have."

Anakin felt himself deflate slightly. This time, when he responded, his words were much softer. "Yes, Master."

"Still believe, I do, that give yourself a way out, you should not."

"Then we may have to agree to disagree in this case, Master."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps discuss this more at a later date we will. Ample opportunity we should have, as agreed to assist you with your Force Techniques class, Master Yaddle and I have."

Anakin's eyes widened as his mind processed what the little Master

had just told him. They'd agreed? He hadn't expected them to, even if Master Yaddle had said they would consider it. "But, you already have so little time—" he started, but Yoda cut him off with a thump of his Gimmer Stick on the floor.

"Let us worry about that, you should. Enough worries, you have now." Anakin wanted to protest more—the last thing he needed was to be singled out again, and training with two of the most ancient, powerful and well-known masters in the Temple would definitely do that—but Yoda had a point. He really *did* have enough stress at the moment. The opportunity of having some of these burdens lifted from his shoulders did appeal, even if it stung what was left of his pride a bit.

So, slowly, he nodded. "Yes, Master. Thank you, Master."

"Talk further, after your session, we will. For now, Master Xio?" The small being turned to the tall woman, eyebrow raised in question. With the relief and surprise of the small master's appearance, and the conversation that had followed, Anakin had almost forgotten she was there.

She smiled down at the shorter being. "Thank you, Grandmaster." She reached over and picked up a datapad from the table at the side. Then she turned and placed the object in Anakin's hands, before giving him some instructions regarding it. "Here are some questions that Healer Girth and I put together for this," she began but upon seeing him tense again, she hurried to explain, her voice soothing. "Now Anakin, these are suggestions only. If you have any problems answering any of these questions now, then don't. Set them aside for later. *Much* later if necessary. Also," she paused and seemed to consider her words before she spoke. "Also, one of us can come in with you if you would like," she finished softly.

Surprisingly, he appreciated this gesture of kindness far more than he would have thought. It showed just how seriously she took the matter. She had to know that this went far beyond 'hard' and traveled well into 'universe shattering' territory. Of course, the way she wanted to fix it certainly wouldn't ever help Anakin, but he found himself surprised that he saw the gesture for what it was. The very fact that he could appreciate it instead of simply assuming she had an ulterior motive showed just how much he had changed since his original youth. He found it heartening, even if the very thought of anyone being in that room brought the nervousness back in full force.

"No," he said, probably a little too forcefully for Master Xio's liking,

but firmly enough that she wouldn't question it. She didn't, and she remained silent as he continued. "I thank you, Master, but this...this is something I have to do myself."

She didn't bother to hide the fact that she was not happy about this, but he appreciated the fact that she accepted his words with nothing more than a short nod of her head.

"Very well, then, you may start when you wish."

"Thank you, Masters," he said as he stood and bowed to them. Then he turned and walked towards the back of the room, somehow wondering how it suddenly seemed as if the world had plunged into slow motion and yet the dreaded door behind which D-40 waited seemed to grow closer at light speed. He sensed when Yoda raised a shield—an extremely strong one, thank the Force—rather thoroughly blocking any thoughts or actions that might escape the room and felt himself relax ever so slightly. At least he could put that worry to rest.

Now he just needed to survive everything else.

He didn't know how long he stood in front of the exit before he gathered the courage to ignore the sick feeling in his stomach and palmed the door open. He stepped into the well-lit room on the other side, taking a glance around. It hadn't changed. Small and simple, it had two chairs in it, one of which was occupied by D-40. It was a familiar scene, and yet this felt so utterly new and foreign somehow. Then the door behind him closed, causing him to jump slightly, showing just how on edge he was. He couldn't help but feel cut off from everyone and everything. Facing that droid now, he'd never felt so alone.

"Welcome, Master Anakin," the droid said in the low, female voice. "Am I to assume that you are planning on doing something else to me today that will make my existence more difficult?"

Her defensive attitude was certainly not making this any easier. Then again, he probably deserved that. He supposed that if he had something change every week and couldn't remember what, how or why that he would be upset too. She also wouldn't be able to remember exactly what he'd done because he would take all of those memories with him. Still, he'd reset her to her original programming (and when did he start thinking of it as a 'her'?) for this. Funny that she would ask that on the one week when he had no intention of doing anything.

"No," he answered softly.

The droid looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yes," he responded, although it seemed harder to speak than before for some reason.

D-40 studied him with an air that he could only describe as scrutinizing for a few moments before she nodded. "Well then, shall we get started?"

Anakin swallowed, his eyes scanning the room again. For a moment, his old paranoia flared and he didn't answer the droid as he swept the room for bugs with the Force. No one who got anywhere under Sidious made the mistake of saying something sensitive when there might be someone undesirable listening in. Even though most bugs weren't alive, he could still sense something off and usually had no difficulty finding the listening devices. He realized that he was being ridiculous, but double checking helped to put his mind to rest. Well, to some degree.

Finally he nodded and moved to place the memory chip into D-40, all the while feeling as if some sort of weight had been laid across his shoulders, or as if a gravity manipulator had been set too high. Once more, he felt the surreal sense of time simultaneously slowing to a crawl and jumping forward at hyperspeed. The datapad's casing creaked in his hands, but he didn't loosen his grip. He needed something to hold onto at the moment.

Once he'd taken his seat, Anakin looked over at the droid. Hadn't their time already passed? He could swear that he'd already been there for hours. Couldn't he escape this torture? He gulped.

"Activate secondary memory system," he croaked. A short, soft whirring sound came from the droid.

"Activation successful. Where shall we begin today?" the droid asked (and he could swear she almost sounding eager).

Anakin's lips parted in preparation to start, but the words refused to come. A sudden blankness overtook his mind, as if he'd forgotten how to speak. So he closed his mouth again and looked down at the datapad in front of him. He didn't know what to say or where to start or how to start or...

And right there, at the top of the page of the datapad Girth had typed,

"*If all else fails, start at the beginning.*"

The former Sith blinked and then glanced back up at the droid before looking down at the datapad again. That wasn't as easy as it sounded. Would that be the first beginning or the second one? Or should he start with basic knowledge and facts that would be helpful?

And then the answer came to him.

Grimly he set his mouth in a hard line and looked up at the droid again. Somehow, the right words appeared in his mind and when he voiced them, his tone did not quiver, fade or break. He spoke with a surety that gave no room for second guesses.

"The first thing that you need to know is that I am a time traveler."

That did not seem to be what the droid was expecting. Go figure.

"Excuse me, could you repeat that? I believe my audio input may be malfunctioning."

Anakin shook his head. "No, you heard me correctly. You must know this or everything we may discuss from this point out will be worthless. In all actuality, I am nearly 47 years old mentally. This is no delusion, no psychosis and no mental projection. It is a fact. I come from approximately 35 years in the future."

The droid took a moment to compute that before she could answer. "That is...very difficult to believe."

"Perhaps," Anakin shrugged. "But it is the truth. I recommend you simply treat it as what it is. If you have difficulty doing so, I can change your programming."

If a droid could look worried, this one did. She didn't answer, so Anakin continued. "With that in mind, I will tell you about myself. I was born..."

After that, much to his surprise, the words practically fell out of his mouth. Once he started, he found it difficult to stop. He hadn't realized just how badly he'd wanted to tell someone everything—to just let it all out and not have to watch every word that passed his lips. He hadn't had time to really consider telling Qui-gon and the only other person he might even remotely consider would be Siri, who knew most of everything to begin with and didn't exactly have the mental capacity for much more at the moment. He felt weak for

needing this, but part of him was so relieved that he didn't care. Just having that release...he couldn't begin to put into words just how much more relaxed and grounded he felt, even now when he'd only just reached the point when he and his mother finally left the cruelty of Gardulla the Hutt to go with Watto.

It surprised him that he felt as relieved as he did and the whole experience seemed more than a little surreal because, in all actuality, he hadn't *done* anything to really solve any problems, and yet he somehow felt that he had.

Maybe there was more to this "mind healing" than he'd originally given credit for. If he could survive these therapy sessions without killing everyone or turning again then this might be constructive and helpful after all. He still didn't want to revisit (or worse, relive) the consequences of some of his worse choices. Already, he was planning on smoothing over those when he came to them, but despite all of that, he was surprised at how much this whole thing seemed to help.

Every now and then, the droid would stop him and ask him to elaborate on how he felt about one thing or another. Sometimes, she would ask for details on why he had done something or if he could remember anything that happened in between one point and another. He was sure he had left out some things (and figured he would probably remember them at a later point), but for the most part, he told the droid about his childhood as chronologically as he could.

Then he reached the week before he'd been freed.

"At this point, I have to pause and let you know that here is where I returned from the future," he said carefully, watching the droid for a reaction. "As for now, I will continue along my original memories."

"Acknowledged." Anakin noted how she still sounded uncomfortable and decided that he should probably look at her programming after all. However, the idea of cutting off here and now so he could do so did not appeal to him. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to start again in the next session, and so he made a mental note to check her over next time and went on to describe the Boonta Eve Classic.

It wasn't difficult to portray how he'd ended up competing and eventually winning the race the first time. He didn't think he would ever forget that first feeling for as long as his soul existed. At least, he hoped not, but he also couldn't help recalling and comparing it all to the second time he'd won that particular race, which had been far

more certain but still positive in a very different manner. It had been, of course, more jaded and tainted, but still happy and a victory in more ways than just winning the race. It troubled him that he was having a marginally difficult time keeping the two timelines straight when it came to his emotions. He could distinctly and separately remember each timeline well enough, but sometimes he would find himself pausing and analyzing just how differently he'd felt at each point in time that he had relived. The more he thought on it, the more jumbled it seemed to become in his head. He found that...worrisome. Shouldn't it become clearer? And in some ways it did, but in others...

Still, he struggled on, describing as best he could the circumstances that lead to his rejection from the Temple and Obi-wan taking him as a padawan. It was more difficult than he realized it would be as he had so much more experience and knowledge now. He could see so many things now that had somehow escaped him as a child. Sometimes he wondered exactly how he had grown to be so dense his first time around and chalked it up to his semi-sheltered life on Tatooine. True, one could never *really* have a sheltered life there, but his mother had tried as best she could and sometimes it surprised him as to how successful she'd been with nothing to work with but sheer determination. Well, at the very least, he had finally discovered where his own trait of stubbornness had come from.

He had just finished with his victory above Naboo when the droid stopped him.

"I believe our hour has almost expired," she cut in smoothly when Anakin had paused to take a breath.

He frowned and glanced at the chrono, which confirmed that yes, he had already almost been babbling for an hour straight. Funny, it hadn't seemed nearly that long and he hadn't gotten to any of the truly relevant parts—not to his relationship to Padmé or his children or the Clone Wars. Part of him couldn't help but to feel disappointed that he hadn't really gotten anywhere, but he couldn't deny that the other part of him felt an immense relief that he also hadn't reached any of those painful points in his history that most of him still desperately wished to avoid.

With an acknowledging nod of his head, he got up and walked over to the droid, removing the memory chip. For a moment, he simply stood and stared down at the small piece of metal that lay in his palm. In his own mind, it seemed that the chip should be far heavier now; that he should be able to physically feel the truths stored inside of it.

"I look forward to seeing you in the next session, Master Anakin," the droid said, bringing him out of his strange thoughts. He glanced up at her and raised an eyebrow in question. She always said that (no matter what language he programmed), however—and it may have been Anakin's own projections of feelings—this was the first time that she seemed to mean it. Of course, this was also the first time she wasn't speaking in some random, obscure language even after he took the memory chip.

"Thank you, D-40," he said, surprised that he meant the words...mostly. He stood there in silence for a moment longer before turning and walking back out into the main room.

Master Xio had been conversing with Yoda, but both of them quieted and focused on Anakin when he walked out.

"Well, was that as bad as you thought it would be?" the younger master asked, a calm but wary smile on her face.

He shrugged. "No, but I haven't reached anything severely relevant yet."

"Hmm," Yoda said, and then chuckled. "Fix the past in a single day we cannot," he commented.

Anakin couldn't help but stare in shock at the Grandmaster, his mask breaking down despite himself. How could he know? Why had he said that? Or was he just talking about the mind-healing? Had he figured everything out somehow? For a moment Anakin argued furiously with himself. *He knows,* he thought, only to counter himself in the next heartbeat. *He can't know! There isn't any possible way he can...is there?* The uncertainty made him feel much younger and more vulnerable than he really was—made him feel like he really was a ten-year-old child. And worse, without outright asking, there was no way he could know if the Grandmaster actually knew anything. One could never really tell with Yoda and somehow he suspected the little troll liked it that way.

He almost found himself blurting out one of the hundreds of questions running through his mind, but his eyes shot over to Master Xio, who was looking at Yoda with a thoughtful expression and nodding. This gesture alone was enough to motivate him to bite back his questions and keep a careful hold on his tongue.

"No," he said, unable to keep the unnerved tone out of his voice. "You can't."

Yoda scrutinized him for a moment before nodding and sliding off of the chair he'd apparently claimed after Anakin had gone into the other room. "Rest today, you should. Next session, leave time afterward. Begin our sessions then, we will."

Master Xio frowned at the older being. "Master, are you sure that's wise? Often these kinds of sessions leave the patient emotionally exhausted and unable to focus."

The small Jedi nodded thoughtfully and paused for a moment before replying. "If necessary, it becomes, schedule another time, we will."

The tall woman still looked rather unsure, but after a moment she sighed and bobbed her head. "Very well. I know you have other demands on your time."

Yoda smiled in acknowledgment and walked towards the room's exit. As the ancient master disappeared through the doorway, Master Xio turned to give a few stern but well-meant orders to her patient.

"As for you, Initiate, it is time for you to rest. Head straight back to your quarters. You can pick up something to eat on the way, but today has been a stressful day for you and you need the sleep."

Anakin could only nod in acknowledgment. A few moments later he too left, making his way out of the room and into the corridor beyond in a sort of numb trance. He did find it rather odd that despite the fact that Yoda had only left a few moments before, the little troll was nowhere to be seen in the hallway.

xXx

He skipped racing that night. Normally he loved his escape from the demands of the temple, but in this instance, he really was just too tired. He did grab something to eat on the way back to his room (a rare luxury as normally the younger children weren't supposed to eat in their quarters unless they had permission), but had barely gotten through a little more than half of the meal before his eyes began to drift shut. He only had the barest thought to put the food on his desk before he collapsed into the bed, fully clothed, and fell asleep.

Later that night, when the Temple had moved well into its final cycle, the beeping of his comm roused him from his slumber. Groggily he pushed himself up onto his elbows and used the Force to bring the silly thing to him. Then he groped for the answer button as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the holo-message. It was from the only

contact he'd set to have a continuous ring: Jango Fett.

'*First 5 packages acquired. Awaiting delivery destination.*' As Anakin's eyes scanned the message, he felt his heart jump a little. The first of the slaves on his list had been liberated! He'd had plans set in place long before he'd spoken with Jango the first time, and so was able to quickly send the relevant information to the bounty hunter. As he shut his com off, he made a mental note to transfer funds to the man's account in the morning.

Then, feeling lighter than he had in years, he fell back on his pillow and drifted off into the oblivion of sleep once again.

xXx

The next morning, Anakin woke early feeling unusually ready for the day. He thought for about returning to sleep for a moment once he realized just how early (at least two hours) he'd roused, but decided that he had a far better use for his time than forcing himself to get more sleep than his body needed. He could train or do some more research on planets where refugees and freed slaves would be welcomed (or at least given a decent shot at living their own life), or he could work on his disguises more...

He paused at that thought. He would need to see Dooku again soon, if only to make sure that the other man hadn't lost his patience and decided to confront Palpatine. Anakin really felt like he'd gotten through to the other man, though, and was fairly sure the Count wouldn't turn this time around. Then again, he'd been sure of other things that had turned out exactly opposite of his predictions. He didn't want to take any chances here.

Of course, that meant he would have to avoid the bounty hunters set on his tail. Perhaps if he sent a droid in his place this time...? It was a thought that had some merit to it. Either way, he would have to get some different, preferably better quality, disguises.

With his goal set, he nodded firmly and prepared to leave the Temple immediately. He'd have to get to where he needed to go and back before the morning meal. Even if he skipped breakfast, he'd have to be at his designated classroom before his first class started to avoid suspicion.

Less than half an hour later, he slipped out of the lower levels of the Jedi temple, prepared to face the long day ahead of him.

xXx

The room of a thousand fountains could become a little disorderly at certain points during the day, usually when it got the most use, but in the very early morning stillness that wrapped itself around the Jedi temple it was nothing short of serene. The Force wrapped around everything here, flowed in and out and rolled in peaceful—almost lazy—waves of contentment. It wasn't an uncomfortable stillness by any means, and it was the perfect time and place to meditate.

Unfortunately, peace just did not seem to want to come to Tai'k Xio tonight. Well, not anymore. Something had called her out of her meditation and attempts to answer her own inquiries as to the previous day's happenings, and she wasn't sure what exactly that was.

To make matters worse, her mind refused to be distracted from the memories of what she'd observed the previous afternoon. And so she continued to stare at one of her favorite fountains, lit up by a natural phosphorescent as the water splashed downwards in a soft trickle.

"Well, you look somewhat troubled," a familiar voice broke the silence softly. "Do you mind if I join you?"

She glanced over her shoulder at the younger man, whom she had known since he had been a padawan training under the different teachers who had sought to instruct him, including one of her good friends, T'ra Saa. "Of course you can, Mace. How have you been?" she asked pleasantly.

He didn't answer for a few moments and Tai'k couldn't help but feel a tremor of worry at his strange silence.

"I have been as well as can be expected," he finally replied. She frowned. He rarely avoided questions these days, although that had been one of his favorite past-times when he was younger.

"Why are you reverting to old habits you claim to have conquered?" she asked, amused at his mild reversion and more than willing to point it out.

He shot a glance at her out of the corner of his eye, a slight smile on his lips. However, all too quickly his gaze slid back to the fountain that gushed before them and any amusement vanished.

"My ability to see shatterpoints has been...compromised."

Tai'k blinked in surprise. "What do you mean?"

His lips thinned and she couldn't help but be reminded of the frustrated teenager that he had once been—the boy who had pushed himself so hard that he had nearly broken himself. Her pet theory about his ability to see shatterpoints had a lot to do with his actions as a youngling and Padawan.

"They still exist, and I can still see them and understand their effects, but lately I've come across points that...overlap, for lack of a better term. I've never seen such a phenomenon before. It's as if someone is patching the old shatterpoints and inadvertently making new ones. But if that is the case, why can I still see the old shatterpoints at all? They should vanish completely."

"Is that how they usually behave?" she asked, voicing her own thoughts carefully. The conversation of which they spoke was fairly dangerous ground, one not wholly understood by anyone.

He nodded. "I have deliberately not taken advantage of shatterpoints and they often heal themselves, those few that don't remain until fixed or broken. They are generally immensely complex in their effects, but fairly simple in this regard. Or at least they have been up until this point."

Tai'k frowned, able to see why this new conundrum bothered him. Such base changes to someone's perspective of the universe could be...disturbing.

"Do you know why it has been happening?" she asked, thinking that if they could trace it back to its origin, it would shed more light on this strange turn of events.

"I have my suspicions," Mace responded stonily.

"Oh? And they are?"

The dark-skinned man glanced over at her grimly. "It all started when Anakin Skywalker came to the Temple."

Whatever she'd been expecting, it hadn't been that, and she could only stare at him blankly for several seconds as her mind wrapped around what he had revealed.

"You think that that little boy is the cause of this somehow?"

"Why not?" he asked, sounding almost bitter. "Qui-gon believed he was the chosen one."

Tai'k gasped. "The one that will bring balance to the Force?"

"Supposedly."

The older master frowned again. "You don't sound so sure of it."

"I'm not. I don't know what to think of him."

"That's rare for you. Does the uncertainty frighten you?"

Mace shot a dry glare at her. "I didn't come here to get lectured or analyzed."

She didn't take offense to his sniping statement. Instead she smiled softly at him and leaned back on her hands, ignoring the creaking of her bones. Force she was getting old. "You may not have come here for that purpose, but somehow I think the Force may have led you here as it did me."

The teenager she had watched grow up would have denied that. The man sitting next to her simply sighed. "Perhaps you are right. It has thrown me off balance."

"No one likes to be off balance," she commented mildly, understanding full well that he knew this but also discerning that he needed to hear it anyway.

He nodded slowly in agreement, but she could see the mild annoyance in his movements that confirmed his knowledge. She had to focus to keep down the chuckle that threatened to break loose at his almost petulant expression. She doubted very many would have seen it as such, but few knew him as well as she did.

"What are your impressions of him?" Mace asked, suddenly seeming very interested in her thoughts on the matter and staring at her with that unnervingly intense gaze of his.

"You know I can't say much, Mace. Patient-doctor confidentiality." Not that he didn't know most of what she did anyway as he was a part of the Council that she would report to concerning his progression. Mainly he didn't know what Anakin specifically asked her not to repeat.

"I know most of what you're doing anyway; like bringing in that togruta girl today," he confirmed as if reading her thoughts. Then he cocked his head, brow furrowing ever so slightly. "Why did you do that?"

Tai'k sighed and decided that a brief summary of what she'd learned during her time with the child wouldn't be out of place. "He has completely blown through all of my predictions, accelerating unbelievably in some areas and hardly growing at all in others. I'm afraid we haven't even touched on what is truly holding him back, but he wants to change, Mace. He wants to become better, he just doesn't trust himself to do so. I think he's scared to give up control because it has been taken away from him so often that he doesn't realize how clinging to it is hurting him. Once he begins to understand that letting go of that control is what will give him the most freedom and when I think he'll make the most progress, but he is not ready for that now, and he needs support.

"That was why I brought Ahsoka in to meet him. He needs to feel at home at the temple, to get to know and care for the people around him and learn to trust them. He has to begin to get to know people outside of his age group."

"Isn't that encouraging attachment?" Mace asked, a frown on his face at the perceived slight to the Code.

Tai'k stared at the fountain again, her own face blank. She should have known that he would voice her own fears.

"I was afraid it might," she admitted. "I originally brought her in because he said she reminded him of someone he'd known. Maybe that is why he was able to talk all of her fears away and get her to open up to him almost immediately. If anyone has the potential to allow him to trust them, I think it's that little girl. Besides, I..." she faded off, not sure if she really wanted to voice that particular opinion and annoyed at herself for allowing it to slip out like that.

"Besides what?" Mace asked.

The older master sighed, knowing very well that he wouldn't leave it alone and would bring it up in front of the council if she didn't say something now.

"Seeing those two together, it was just so...*right,* Mace. I don't know how else to describe it. They spoke and she calmed him down and he kept her interest the entire time—a three-year-old, hyperactive togruta

youngling, I might add—and the Force *sang*." She shook her head. "Attachment or not, the Force wants those two together. When they are older, we may even consider putting them in a Master/Padawan relationship."

Mace raised an eyebrow at her declaration. "Chances are she will reach the age of choosing long before the boy becomes a knight, and that is if he becomes an apprentice at all."

Tai'k nodded her own acknowledgment this time, but she couldn't help but state grimly, "If he does not become an apprentice, the Temple—and I fear in turn, the universe at large—will be all the worse for it."

She expected Mace to say something like 'as it is with all who cannot be chosen to become a padawan.' It seemed as though he generalized subjects like that all too often. Far too many times he included all who had been hurt, and all of his own shortcomings, in statements similar to this.

So when he spoke, it surprised her. "With the shatterpoints that converge on that boy, I can believe it. Whether usual, healing or the strange phantoms of what once was, they are always there with him. He is...fragile in ways that I'm not sure even I can comprehend, and I can *see* it. That is why I fear for his future, because if he is the Chosen One—and the longer I observe him, the more I believe it—I am not sure the universe can survive it. If he is the boy of the prophecy, then he will have to shoulder so much, and I don't know if he can. If he breaks..." The man faded off with a shudder.

Tai'k stared at him for several moments, struck wordless at the heart felt revelation her companion had just spoken.

"What have you seen, Mace?" she finally asked softly and warily.

He shook his head and closed his eyes for a moment as if to gather himself before glancing at her again. "I'm not sure, Tai'k. The phantom points cloud my vision. Sometimes it seems as if nothing can break him, and other times it seems as if the slightest breeze will. I can't make heads or tails of it. And the longer he stays here, the more of these phantom shatterpoints I find. He's affecting so much...I don't think he really understands how much."

Tai'k frowned thoughtfully and had to go over that in her head a few times before it hit her. "You are afraid. Not of him, but for him."

"For him and the galaxy because I can't help but think that one is directly connected to the other," Mace admitted. "I know fear is of the dark side. I may know that better than anyone else on the Council, with perhaps the exception of Masters Yaddle and Yoda. I know whatever happens is the will of the Force, and that knowledge seems to be all that can counter these new fears and uncertainties. I can accept that, but I'm not sure I know exactly what the Force wants anymore or where it is leading us."

The mind-healer allowed herself a small smile as she laid a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Are you saying you are losing faith in the Force?"

Mace glanced away from her, slumping ever so slightly, as if an unseen weight had fallen onto his shoulders. "No, I don't think so, but sometimes it feels that way."

She couldn't help but shake her head and wonder how often this man showed this side of himself to anyone. Somehow, she doubted even Master Yoda saw this from the man and she couldn't help but feel honored that he had allowed her to share this burden of his.

"Remember, where faith is, fear cannot be, for one cancels out the other. It is up to you as to which to choose. Just know that I have the utmost faith that everything will turn out as it should and you can lean on me until you have regained your own equilibrium in the Force."

"Thank you, I may just take you up on that," he said with an expression that wasn't quite a smile, but still seemed pleased. "You sounded like Master Saa there," he added.

Tai'k's smile grew even wider. "Thank you for the compliment." She glanced up at the door of the room as it opened and a young knight came into the area. Then she glanced at her chrono and couldn't help but blink in surprise.

"Merciful Force! I cannot believe I lost track of time!" In a motion more smooth than anyone her age had any right to be (ah, the perks of being a Jedi) she stood and glanced down at Mace. "If you will excuse me, Master Windu," she said with a bow. Then she straightened and made to leave, but before she did, she turned back to him.

"Do not worry too much over this new development. It is troubling, but the answer you seek for will come in time. It always has, and it always will."

The small stress lines around his eyes did seem more relaxed, so she would count it as a victory.

"As you say, Master Xio," he said, his council-member mask back in place. "Thank you for allowing me to speak with you. May the Force be with you."

She gave one final nod and left the room feeling far more at peace than she had in a while, despite the plethora of questions running through her head.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, I would like to thank EACH AND EVERY PERSON that sent in a chapter to be beta tested. Seriously, by the time I was done, I had more than 30 that I had to go through (I think 32 was the final count). I took everyone's opinion into account and I made a LOT of changes because I did read every one of them. That took me more than two months with full-time school that's an hour away. I got some FABULOUS insights though. :) I'm still putting together a list, but seeing as this is from at least two different sites plus real life, well I don't want to post something and have someone feel left out. It takes a lot more time than I would have guessed just to go through freaking e-mails and cross reference them with notes. Gah.

Secondly, my boyfriend proposed to me. Due to family circumstances (and the fact that a lot of people wouldn't be able to make it later on in the year), we decided to get married sooner rather than later. So I then faced dealing with school and preparing a wedding in four months on top of finding a new place to live on top of having to worry about going up to Washington where his family lives (and that's at least a 12 hour drive both ways) on top of arranging everything in the tiny apartment that we finally did get...hectic doesn't begin to describe it. Not that I regret it, and I do think it is a rather good reason for not posting anything for several months.

Also, both of my computers died and I had to transfer everything to a new computer that still doesn't seem to like me all that much. I think I've lost a lot of data that way.

Thirdly, I've gotten ahold of a few people to see if they were still interested in being a beta and they either haven't answered or they said no. I actually think that I may have written down wrong

information for at least a few of you, so I would like you to re-send me a note with your e-mail in it if you're still interested in being a beta reader. I know I've asked at least once before, but due to problems (a lot of which meant that I couldn't pair names here with e-mails that were sent to me, and the rest due to losing info thanks to my old computers, thanks a lot Toshiba). I'm sorry that the moment I ask for a new beta reader, my life fell apart. I've got it back together now, so there shouldn't be a problem.

Of course, I'm sure I just tempted fate. *knocks on wood*

Lastly, I've gone through and started to revamp the first story in this series, Hindsight is Not Perfect. I'd appreciate knowing what you think of it. I have the first three or so chapters done already and will hopefully be moving onto later ones soon.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> For those of you who may not remember what the story is about, there is a summary at the top of the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darth Sidious patience had finally worn thin. He was done playing Vader's games. If the other Sith wanted to play hard-to-get, then Sidious would force his hand. The Sith Master had plans he needed to set in motion, and most of them required that he have an apprentice, whoever that apprentice may be.

He'd already managed to acquire several young Force-sensitives, some of whom hadn't even been on his list of possibilities. He found this surprising considering that he'd compiled it himself. Perhaps he'd have to find a way to break into the Jedi temple and obtain their list after all. He'd already begun training his finds to become said apprentice, just in case nothing else worked out, but he'd already waited long enough. He knew the consequences of rushing into anything unplanned, but he of all people also knew that sometimes one had to take a risk.

He stared hard at the door in front of him before lifting a finger and pressing a button.

After a few moments, during which time Palpatine double checked his mental mask and composure, the hotel door opened to reveal a well-dressed man with a neatly trimmed beard and gray hair. The man took one look at him and Sidious had all the confirmation he needed: Dooku knew. This would be an amusing conversation after all...

"Chancellor Palpatine," Count Dooku said with a slight, if stiff bow. "What brings you here?"

"I was worried, my friend," the Chancellor said in his famous grandfatherly tone which he'd perfected long ago. "I've sent word to you multiple times. When I received no reply, I wondered if perhaps I might have offended you. If it is so, I've come to make amends."

Anyone else would have fidgeted nervously, but not Dooku. The former Jedi stood stoically—almost regally—scrutinizing the Chancellor of the Republic. It was one of the many reasons Palpatine

had set his sights on turning the man to his side.

Sidious stood with equal (superior) confidence, patiently waiting for him to make a decision and preparing himself for anything that might happen. After a few minutes, the Count seemed to come to a conclusion.

"Very well, Chancellor. Would you like to come in?"

Palpatine smiled. Only someone who knew the Chancellor incredibly well would have been able to see the steel hidden in the gesture. "Of course, Count Dooku," he responded magnanimously as he stepped inside.

xXx

Anakin returned to the temple that morning in a good mood, feeling far lighter than he had the day before. It was an extremely pleasant state of being and one that he could most certainly grow used to. In addition, he'd been able to find all of the supplies he'd had in mind for his future 'costumes' for a very reasonable price. He'd never really gone incognito before and found that he liked the idea of learning how to do it properly.

Unfortunately, his good mood didn't last, though.

The other children all quieted as he approached their table for first meal, staring at him like they had no idea quite how they should act. He frowned as he made to sit down, noting their wariness uneasily. True, he'd been in a far less responsive mood than normal for the previous few days days, but he hadn't thought it would make that much of a difference. What really surprised him though, was how disappointed he felt at their distance.

After a few seconds (that felt far longer) of awkwardness and staring, they all plastered false smiles on their faces and welcomed him to their table, each supposedly more than happy to sit with him and moving down to make room for him. He appreciated the gesture, truly, but it irked him that they seemed to walk on eggshells around him, only tentatively talking to him and carefully wording any questions they directed to him. It reminded him far too much of his time as a Sith Lord.

The worst part about it all was how Tru Veld and Darra Thel-Tanis—and even a few of their friends whom Anakin had never met before—had managed to integrate themselves into Anakin's group of allies. He

couldn't remember Darra ever having been wary of him in his previous life and Tru had only acted this way towards him after they were no longer friends. Their forced friendliness towards him only made an already awkward situation that much worse, but Anakin didn't want to leave and push the wedge that had come between them even further, so he sat and bore it as best he could.

He apologized for his actions previously and tried to be as friendly as he possibly could. Sadly his attempts at conversation only seemed to make the others more tense. Eventually, he just lapsed into silence, opting to listen to the others and their stiff small talk rather than forcing himself on them. He couldn't have been more thankful for Maelee declaring that they needed to leave for class.

Fortunately, the school day improved somewhat, with the exception of him getting a reprimand for skipping his Force Techniques class. He didn't particularly mind, though, as he received a rather mild punishment because they probably understood (or at least thought they understood) why he'd missed it. He was to write an essay on any subject covered by the Force Techniques class and then had two weeks to put together a demonstration. He knew almost immediately what he would write on: The difference between a battle trance and normal fighting highlighting the benefits and drawbacks of both. The battle-trance remained one of the few things pertaining to meditation that he could still perform. As such, he figured he would be able to demonstrate his points easily while giving the rest of his age mates tips for any future battles that they may have to fight. Unfortunately, it was a light trance at best and did not lend itself to deeper meditation, meaning that it could never go anywhere with this ability outside of its intended use.

Despite the improvements and otherwise normal day, it was with great relief that he collapsed onto his bed that evening. Between the research for his paper and the other children's attitudes towards him throughout the day, he couldn't wait for it to end.

The next day started slightly better with the other children acting, thankfully, more like themselves. However, although things had improved, something he couldn't quite put his finger on seemed to have changed between Anakin and the other initiates. It definitely wasn't a positive development, and half-way through first meal, Anakin decided that enough was enough. He would not stand idle as his efforts to make allies went to waste. He resolved that he would do something proactive in order to regain the other initiates' friendship and trust.

It was the single day at the end of the five-day week that the children usually had off to do with as they pleased (when they had finished their studying, homework and meditation, of course). Realizing he had an opportunity, he stood from his spot at the end of the dining table and waited patiently for the other initiates' attention. He didn't have to wait long.

"Seeing as we have no classes today, your presences will be required at 1300 hours in the Room of A Thousand Fountains," he announced. He gazed around at the square table expectantly only to find everyone blinking or gaping back at him in surprise. Good. "I expect to see all of you there barring the most dire of circumstances. If that is the case, we will visit you in the healer's wing afterward." Just so they knew what he meant when he said 'dire'.

Before anyone could overcome their astonishment and reply or protest, he hopped off of the table, grabbed the remains of his meal, and left, dropping his tray off with the droids as he exited the dining hall. He wondered how many of them would show up at his impromptu meeting.

Hoping to work off some of his frustration, he went to practice his lightsaber forms the entire mornng. He grabbed a light lunch and didn't sit at their table for the midday meal, choosing instead to head to the Room of a Thousand Fountains a little early and wait for the other initiates to arrive.

Coira came first, joined soon afterward by Hale and Hik'te. Then, one by one, the others slowly trickled in. Much to his surprise, it turned out that only Baask, Tru's torgruta friend, didn't show. Even Maelee came, although she did look rather put-out at having to miss her normal study time, especially when she was informed that they'd be playing a game for their afternoon activity.

"What?" she asked incredulously as soon as he'd finished speaking. She wasn't the only one that seemed surprised or disappointed. Everyone stared (in some cases, glared) openly at him from their places scattered around the small, glade-like area where they'd met.

"Your objective is simple," he continued, ignoring her outburst. "You are to hide yourselves from me without leaving this room. You may use any means to do so with the exception of hurting myself or anyone else. Once found, you will hide again, hopefully having learned to choose your shelter more carefully.

"Think of this as a training exercise," he decided to add, noting the darkening expressions on some of their faces. "If anyone succeeds, you will receive a reward." And his respect because he sincerely doubted anyone would be able to truly hide from him for long. "If no one succeeds, the person who has been found the least within the next hour will be the winner." Thankfully, his clarification and the addition of a reward did seem to calm most of them down, although Maelee still looked fit to be tied.

After that, he gave them a few simple hints on how to hide one's presence in the Force, and then sent them off.

As he'd suspected, he found each one of them easily multiple times. Also, as expected, as the game wore on, the others' caution towards him began to drain away, instead turning into an expectant excitement that had a rather playful edge to it.

After an hour, they gathered near the Fountain where they'd originally met to compare notes. Coira won, having only been discovered three times, while Tru and Darra tied for second with six discoveries apiece, and it went up from there.

"How did you get to be so good, Ani?" Coira asked, smiling up at Anakin from her position on the ground. Her tone had regained the familiar note of respect that her voice usually held when he impressed them. Her words did more to reassure him than just about anything else could. He almost sighed with relief that he'd attained his original position with her—with them. He'd been afraid he'd lost their trust and any chance for...well, friendship for a while there. Part of him didn't want to lose his allies, but he had to admit that another part of him didn't want to give up his newly formed attachments.

Still another part of him wanted to bang his head on the wall. He really shouldn't be encouraging them...or himself for that matter.

"I have had experience searching for...others," he said carefully, trying to ignore the images of the Jedi he'd killed as they flashed before his eyes.

Coira frowned and was about to open her mouth again when Hik'te interrupted, thankfully. He really didn't want to dwell on that subject any more.

"This was a great idea, Ani," the blue-skinned being said with a grin splitting his face.

"It was a lot of fun," Darra agreed from behind him.

"And next time, you won't have it so easy." Surprisingly, that one had come from Maelee. Anakin couldn't help but stare at her for a few moments. It wasn't often that she acted like the child she was supposed to be.

"There will be a next time, right?" Hik'te asked, tone only slightly hesitant.

Anakin smiled at him. "Of course. Perhaps not every weekend, but it is a good exercise."

Despite having lost quite a bit of time that he could have used for saber practice or more plotting and preparation for his eventual confrontation with Palpatine, he counted the day's activities as a success. Not only had he dispelled all of their worries towards him, but he'd also given them a lesson in stealth that could very well save their lives in the future.

As they split up for the day, Anakin couldn't help but feel he'd accomplished quite a bit somehow.

xXx

Bant Eerin sat staring at the holo-screen that held her most recent report on Siri Tachi's mental health, unsure of what she should do next. Adi-Gallia would be expecting it soon and Bant had almost completed it, but she was originally only going to mention Anakin's part in it in passing. Now, though, as she thought about it, she couldn't help but feel that doing so would not be wise.

How had he known about Siri's visions? How had he known just what would calm her down and bring her back from the brink of insanity? And why had it seemed to affect him (for the better) as well. He'd been so...cold when she'd found him in front of the healer's ward. Cold and almost uncaring with a hint of ruthlessness to his aura. It had alarmed her because she'd *felt* the power he would one day wield and yet, she had seen no mercy in his frigid blue eyes.

He'd left in far better condition, but it substantiated the rumors going around that he'd had dark side training before he came to the Temple. That brought up several questions and left them unanswered.

Firstly, why had he been allowed to stay at the Temple at all? She knew it wasn't really her decision to make and that she couldn't judge

him for something when she didn't have a complete knowledge of the situation. Besides, she actually *liked* the kid, so she was glad they'd agreed to let him stay, but it just didn't seem like a decision the current Council would make. And yet they had.

Did Obi-wan know? She thought back on the few conversations she'd had with her childhood friend about Anakin and had to conclude that yes, he did know. The way he spoke of Anakin and of his past experiences...

But the most important question right now: How had Siri and Anakin grown a bond that allowed him to see her panic-inducing visions? He'd known just what to say to calm her down—to bring her back to the here and now—and it had made absolutely no sense to Bant. She doubted it would make sense to any other Jedi at this point. Who was this 'Luke' and how had he 'brought the light back'? Why had the light been lost to begin with? And how was he related to Siri and Anakin?

Before, she would have dismissed the ramblings as the product of a broken or over-taxed mind, but now she wasn't so sure, and Adi-Gallia, as the girl's Jedi Master, deserved to know.

After a few moments of contemplation, she decided to write her speculations down in another document. A less formal one that she could discuss with Adi and the other healers at some point. Nothing about this situation was normal, which meant they were missing something. If they were missing something, then it could very well spell out an extremely unpleasant outcome for her patient and everyone involved. When it came to helping someone keep ahold of sanity, there wasn't a lot of room for accidents.

Siri had been improving, but that didn't mean she couldn't relapse. Actually, she had already. Several times. It also didn't mean that she was out of danger of losing her mind permanently. The most extreme caution had to be taken with this, she knew, and the Force seemed to only back that decision.

Something told her that Anakin had a much larger part to play in all of this than what she'd originally assumed. So, as a healer and as a friend, she couldn't leave anything out or mention it briefly, as she normally would. It just wouldn't be right.

xXx

Anakin recieved another communication from Dooku a few days after his first real session with D-40. He read the short message just as he

was checking his schedule and preparing to leave his quarters. He altered his plans accordingly, wondering what the Count wished to discuss this time. Part of him looked forward to the interesting, intellectually stimulating conversation the two of them usually had. However, part of him still couldn't rid his mind of the image of Tyrannus and his own form of ruthless cruelty.

He rolled the question around in his mind on his way to first meal, wondering if he'd finally reached the Count. Things seemed to be progressing nicely, if slowly, in that area, but then, that was fine with him. He didn't really need to hurry, after all. He just needed to keep an eye on things.

Allowing himself the small indulgence of a smile, he moved on and began to go over a list of what he would need for his classes that day. Someone calling his name drew him out of his thoughts. Pausing, he turned to see Thoran jogging up to him, an excited bounce in his step.

"Good morning, Thoran," Anakin greeted politely. "I don't normally see you before first meal. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Thoran just grinned that creepy bothan grin before blurting out, "Brain Implants."

Anakin just blinked at him for several seconds.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's your secret, isn't it? I mean, it would explain why you know so much but have such a hard time doing things, sometimes. You have the information up here," he said, tapping the side of his head, "but your body isn't used to it! I know they're illegal and so I'm guessing you either didn't have any choice or you didn't know at the time, but it also explains why you catch onto things so quickly!"

For several seconds, Anakin just stared at his friend and wondered what in the Force he was talking about. Eventually, his mind caught up, and then, for the first time in what felt like forever, he laughed. It wasn't a small chuckle either, but a deep, hearty guffaw.

After a few seconds, he calmed down and managed to look at his (slightly put out) friend without breaking down again. Force, that felt good. He couldn't stop himself from smiling wryly though. He gave Thoran mental props for coming to such a conclusion. The bothan was right, after all, it would explain a few things. Except...

"Don't brain implants of that caliber usually cause permanent brain damage?"

"Well, usually, but not always," Thoran responded firmly. Anakin couldn't help but feel his respect for the boy go up a few notches as even after he'd laughed in his friend's face, the boy was still determined to stand by his theory "I mean, just because most people get it wrong doesn't mean that someone, somewhere couldn't get it right."

"Or you think that I already have some brain damage," Anakin deadpanned...well, he hoped he deadpanned. He wasn't quite sure he'd been able to get that smile completely off of his face. This was definitely going to go in his mental box of good memories.

Thoran frowned. "Oh, come on. Tell me I'm right! The others and I were discussing it and mine is the most plausible explanation."

At that, Anakin couldn't help but smile apologetically. "No. Sorry, but you aren't correct."

The look of utter defeat on Thoran's face almost had him feeling sorry for the kid. Almost.

"I'm not right?" he asked as he slumped down. "But I was so sure." Then he eyed Anakin skeptically. "Would you tell me if I was right?"

Anakin thought about that for a moment and then figured 'why not'. It wasn't like the other Jedi would guess correctly.

"Yes."

The bothan sighed and ran a hand through the fur on top of his head. "Guess it's back to the old drawing board."

"I guess so. But out of curiosity," Anakin said, catching onto a line the bothan said before. "You said you and the others discussed it and that yours was the most plausible theory. What were the others?"

"Well," Thoran began, "Tru thinks you had a vision of some sort. Most of those that didn't go with my theory went with his."

"And those who didn't go with either one?" he'd better cover all of his bases here, and something was nudging him to ask these questions.

"Oh, the last one was Coira," he said with a dismissive wave of his

hand. "She's convinced you're from the future."

Anakin could only stare at him, dumbfounded.

Thoran rolled his eyes, mistaking Anakin's reaction. "I know, right? Sometimes I wonder about her. But anyway, don't get too complacent. I will figure out what's going on with you! Come on, we'd better get going to first meal."

"Right," Anakin said, trying to shake off his utter shock. It didn't work too well.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! Life has finally slowed down for a bit and so I've been able to do a bunch of writing on this. Woohoo!

I've finally been able to choose some beta readers! Firstly, I would like to thank each and every one of you that participated in editing and beta reading the chapters these last few months. Seriously, I cannot STRESS how difficult it was to find a beta reader because so many of you were that good. One awesome reader actually went through the ENTIRE story and beta read the whole thing! Seriously, you guys rock. However, two people have stuck with me through my...rather sporadic updating. They're both very good and so thank Khalthar and SPJaymo117 for this chapter! You guys rock!

Ok, so I have seen the new movie, and while I don't think it will affect what is going on, I will say that this story will probably stay in Legends universe. Just an fyi.

Next chapter is almost finished, so it should be up within the next few weeks here. ;)

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin managed to corner Coira just before their lunch break, promising everyone else that they'd catch up. Thoran shot him a knowing look and just nodded, probably figuring Anakin would inform her how wrong her theory was, before shooing the others away.

Anakin couldn't help but be grateful.

"So," Coira asked, eyes curious and just a little cautious, "what did you want to talk about?"

"Thoran told me about your theory," he said slowly.

The girl's eyes widened just a little and she shot a nasty look after the other retreating children. "He did?"

"To be fair, I did ask him outright," Anakin said hurriedly.

Coira seemed to deflate a little and glanced back at him, her cheeks just a little red from embarrassment. "Yeah, I just threw it out there a few days back."

"I was just curious as to why you came up with that idea."

She shrugged and turned to walk after the other children. "It was just in a story I read, once. I guess...it was really silly, huh?"

Anakin frowned and hurried to get ahead of her, turning to face her with folded arms, forcing her to stop in her tracks. He would never know how intimidating of a figure he posed, standing there like that.

"If there is anything my mind healing sessions have taught me, it is that people do not just 'do' things for no reason. You either wanted it to be true or you really thought it was true, otherwise you would not have said it." Actress or not, she'd never struck him as the kind of person that would deliberately and blatantly deceive someone, especially fellow Jedi. True, there had always been something different about her, something that alienated her from the other children, but she also held a wholesome intensity that just made

people—even old, cynical people like Anakin—want to trust her. He also suspected that she was far more intelligent than she let on.

She shuffled her feet a little, obviously uncomfortable talking to him about the subject, but she was too close to his secret for him to back down.

"Well, it did fit a lot of what you've said and done—how you act older than you are a lot of the time, but still like a kid and all, how you know everything from class, how you're always ahead of us and you learn so quickly, stuff like that."

"But you don't think it's the most plausible explanation?"

She met his gaze, suddenly exasperated. "Of course not! I mean, time-travel? Really? Well, I guess stranger things have happened through the Force, but there isn't any recorded evidence of it happening. Besides, I don't think anyone would even know how to go about sending themselves into the past. And even if they could, why go back to your younger body if you're older? I'm not stupid, you know, but I guess I..." she started but faded off.

Anakin raised an eyebrow. "But what?"

"It's nothing."

He highly doubted that, so he unfolded his arms and tried to look as open and welcoming as possible. "Come on, you can tell me."

"It's dumb."

This time Anakin couldn't help the dryness that crept into his tone, or the smirk that wormed its way onto his face. "Try me."

"I...I guess I kind of wanted it to be real. I mean, I know it's not, but it would be...good if it was."

She suddenly shrank away from him, as if scared that he would change his opinion of her. It looked strange. Coira was almost never awkward like that. Even the 10-year-old Anakin from his original time line could have read between the lines.

"Why? What would you want to change?"

She groaned, and for the first time, Anakin thought he was seeing the girl that Coira really was. Perhaps that was why he felt sympathetic

towards her—they were very similar.

"I would change so many things! Don't you see, Anakin? There are thousands—millions—of people who have been hurt. People whose cultures have been destroyed and worlds that have become desolate. People who have lost their freedom and people who never knew to make correct choices. What if we could go back and save them all?"

He just stared at her as the gears in his mind turned. With those words, it somehow fell into place and he could see what he'd been missing the whole time. Coira really wasn't like most Jedi initiates. In all truth, he suddenly realized, she was a conundrum; hopeful and naive, passionate and fanciful. She was the kind of person who would never be able to bury her feelings, just as Anakin had never been able to.

She empathized so well with other people, even those that she'd merely read about in history and on the news-holos, that she simply wanted to help them...and she was naive enough to think that she would be able to. He could see in her some strange mix of both he and Obi-wan—the two most foolish Jedi to ever grace the Temple Halls.

She was what a 9-year-old Anakin had envisioned a Jedi should be.

She was what he had come to learn a Jedi of this day and age should —would—never be.

He was a prime example of that.

Coira was one of those rare people who had a natural disposition to go out of her way to help others, be it someone she knew or a stranger (the latter of which was something even Anakin had had a hard time with). She was the type of person who would gladly sacrifice herself to save anyone else from pain, and as such, she stood the most chance of falling.

As the Jedi Order stood now, she would make a terrible Jedi.

He very seriously doubted that things would end well for her, but he couldn't help but respect her passion. He also couldn't quite stop the sorrow that knotted inside his chest when he thought about her future.

Suddenly, Coira looked away, cheeks coloring with a blush of embarrassment. "I knew you'd think it was stupid," she muttered softly.

"Not at all," Anakin corrected hurriedly. "I just couldn't help but recall something my master used to say. 'Hindsight is 20/20'. He meant to say that we didn't know then what we know now, and so how could we have chosen differently than we did? So we need to let the past go and live in the present." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

"But I've discovered that he was wrong."

He glanced over to see her regarding him, both wary and confused.

"Hindsight isn't perfect," he clarified. "If you did manage to change an event in the past, you will never know how such an act will affect the future. Because a war never occurred, perhaps two people who should have met never did. The children they could have had would never come to be. An entire line is wiped out because of that one change."

"But," Coira argued, looking troubled, "if that war never started, then thousands of people would live and their children would as well. Isn't that better? Thousands of lines in exchange for one?"

"Tell that to the person who will never find their happiness."

The light-haired girl frowned. "Isn't that selfish of them, though? I mean, thousands of people have to go through pain or death before those two people get their happiness."

Anakin chuckled wistfully. "Perhaps so. But I can tell you that every action has unforeseen consequences. You save someone, and they save someone, and they save someone who happens to be a serial killer who kills thirty victims. Dozens of people die because a few people were saved." She didn't respond, only staring at him with a look of horror. He breathed a sigh of relief. She'd caught onto what he'd been trying to say. Still, he decided to go on. Better to be safe than sorry.

"And knowing the future is not all it's cracked up to be either. The biggest danger of foresight is responsibility. An entire universe suddenly becomes yours to bear. Could you handle it? Or would it drive you mad? Yes, bad things have happened in the past, and we should never condone such actions. I'm not excusing them at all, but we should learn from those events and try to prevent the future from repeating itself. In the end, all we can do is our best. Isn't that enough responsibility for one lifetime?"

He couldn't quite read her expression now, but her face looked troubled as she tried to digest his words.

"You...really are from the future...aren't you?" Her voice trembled half in disbelief, half in some misguided hope.

Anakin closed his eyes and brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Perhaps he should have stopped while he was ahead after all. He'd begun to really hate his new goal of being more honest. It would be useless to deny her now. He could tell from the determined glint in her eyes that she wouldn't let it go. He glanced around to make sure no one would overhear them and reached out with the Force. Fortunately, the only person near them was a Master walking in the opposite direction, well out of earshot.

He sighed deeply. "Yes. You can't tell anyone else. The future depends on it." He wanted to groan. Even to him that sounded incredibly cheesy, no matter how true it was.

Coira, being the Naive 11 year old that she was, didn't notice. She simply nodded her head emphatically, her eyes practically glowing with awe. Anakin hated that expression. He didn't deserve anyone's respect at this point.

Almost as if she'd read his thoughts, she looked down and bit her lip.

"If...if what you said was true, then why did you come back?"

Anakin looked around again. Perhaps Dooku was right, was he too paranoid? Then again, this was rather important.

"I...made some ridiculously bad decisions and someone who I think was trying to help sent me back here after I died." He figured that if he was in for a chip, then he was in for a credit. If he was going to tell her the truth, then he wouldn't hide the details. Well, most of them. Well, maybe some of them... Okay, so he wouldn't lie outright.

"So...you have to die to come back?" she asked, the disappointment readily apparent on her face.

Anakin frowned. Perhaps she didn't understand quite as well as he had hoped after all. Still, if it would get her mind off of it...

"Yes. I have no idea how it works or how it happened, but I did have to die first."

After a few more seconds of silence, Anakin turned and began to walk again. Coira hurried after him in silence for a few minutes before she finally spoke again. "So, your other future. What was it like?"

Anakin couldn't help but freeze in his tracks, seeing his companion walk a few steps ahead before she realized she was alone. Judging from the cringe she couldn't fully hide, Anakin figured she knew she may have gone too far too fast. At least she'd picked up on some of the hints he'd handed out.

"A nightmare beyond anything you could imagine," he said, noting how his voice had lowered to a harsh whisper.

She blinked in surprise and her face paled. "W-what do you mean?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" he asked, unwilling to meet her eyes.

She hesitated momentarily, but didn't shy away. "You said you're carrying the weight of the Galaxy now, and maybe I can help a little bit. It just sounds like it would be awfully heavy to do that alone."

Anakin raised his head slowly and turned to fully face her, unable to hide his astonishment. Coira didn't seem to care for his scrutiny and looked away while shuffling her feet nervously. She didn't back down though, and he knew she wouldn't either. He could tell from the determined set of her mouth and her rigid stance, even if she still refused to return his gaze.

"You don't know what you're asking," he protested quietly, hating how raw his voice sounded. He saw her jaw clench and her hands balled into fists. Somehow, he felt himself cave. Someone so earnest and honest, who had no motivation but to help...

"Then tell me."

Anakin forced himself to swallow. "I can't tell you everything," he finally said with a sigh. He knew he was going to regret this. "A lot of things that happened were...well, terrible. Beyond terrible. And...I caused a lot of them myself." He saw the first flicker of doubt in her eyes when her head snapped up to look at him, finally.

"You?" she asked, incredulous. "But you're...well, you're..."

He calmly and directly met her hazel gaze, "If I told you that I was the bad guy, would you ever be able to look at me the same again?"

The expression of horror was back with just a hint of betrayal and more than a little skepticism. "You...hurt people?" He nodded. She gulped. "K-killed people?"

May as well toss in more credits. "Yes." He'd promised Thoran that he would tell them if they guessed correctly anyway. He hoped Thoran (and everyone else) would never find out about this, though. He paused and thought for a moment while she wrapped her head around that.

"Perhaps that is why I can accept coming back," he said after a few moments. He saw her look up at him again from the corner of his eye. "Because it would be very difficult to recreate a future universe as utterly horrific as the one I remember."

And even if he did want to tell her everything, he couldn't. Not only did he doubt he was physically capable of doing so, but no child with only a decade behind them should have to bear such a burden. He could tell her some things, perhaps, and he wouldn't lie outright, but if she wanted to know the gist of it—if she wanted to help so badly—then he found the idea wasn't as distasteful as he thought it would be.

"After class, then?" she asked uncertainly.

He considered that and then shook his head. "I do not think I'll be going to class." Not only did he feel mentally and emotionally exhausted, but the idea of facing everyone in his current state...it wasn't near what it had been before his first real session with D-40, but it was comparable.

If he avoided emotion, then he could do it. Gloss over everything that a child shouldn't know and he should be fine...if he could. He shook the uncertainty from his head. Of course he could. After all, it was examining his in-depth emotions and reliving the past that made him wary (to say the least).

"No, I am sure I will not be attending class."

"Well, let's go then," she said happily, as if she hadn't just been told that her friend was a killer. As if she hadn't just suggested to skip class and earn some rather annoying punishments. If this was her mask...Anakin didn't like it.

"But," he said, glancing around again. Had the Jedi halls always been this empty? She paused and glanced at him over her shoulder, expression wide and innocent. "If I tell you I can't explain something, you need to accept that. I need you to promise me that you won't try."

Her brow furrowed in worry and confusion, but she nodded anyway. "Very well. I promise."

He nodded in relief. That took off the sharp edge of worry off of his concerns.

"And you cannot tell anyone else. I mean it. No masters, no mentors, no healers, definitely no one outside the Temple and none of the other initiates. I cannot stress to you how important this is."

She didn't look too happy about that, but again, she nodded. "Okay. I won't."

"Promise," he insisted, because children took promises so seriously. Especially Jedi children.

"I promise."

"Alright, then you may follow me." With that, he marched down the hall with his back straight and his hands clenched behind him. He didn't realize just how much he looked like a military figure at that point, but Coira definitely noticed as she followed him uneasily.

They found a corner in the room of a thousand fountains and got comfortable, Anakin sitting across from Coira and both using some imported rocks to lean against.

"Alright," he said after a few minutes of allowing the nearby running water to sooth his nerves. "Let me tell you a tale about the Jedi who cared too much."

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He started his story with Qui-gon finding him on Tatooine and told about how he finally came to be accepted into the Jedi Order. He glossed over most of the early years but let her know how close he and his Master became (he wouldn't doubt she'd figured out his Master was Obi-wan, but he still didn't mention him by name—he wanted to be as removed from this as possible, after all).

He told of how he fell in love. Coira seemed rather uneasy at that.

"Isn't that against the Jedi Code?"

He realized that what he was about to say sounded a lot like Obi-wan, probably because he was talking to someone younger than him mentally—someone with whom he had no real idea how to talk to as an adult to a child. So instead of fighting it, he went with it and smiled sadly. "Falling in love isn't against the code. Acting on it is."

He then told her of how he himself had acted on his feelings and married the woman he fell in love with. Then he told her about the Clone Wars, Darth Tyrannus and Darth Sidious and how they had pulled strings from the background just to gain more power and how Anakin hadn't been able to see any of it at the time.

He spoke about his Padawan and the clones and the good people they'd met along the way. He also touched on some of the more prominent turning points and what the media had thought of him, but he didn't dwell on it much.

Then they approached *that* day. Going over it without emotion didn't seem possible, and so he skipped it almost altogether. He told her how the Chancellor at the time, Sidious, had tricked him into thinking his wife would die and persuaded him to fall. That was all he said on the whole subject and some of him still thought it was too much.

Then he noticed how quiet Coira was being and glanced over to see her watching him with wide eyes. That was the first time she actually looked scared of him.

"W...wait, you fell? As in 'to the dark side?'"

He didn't really want to answer, but he'd told himself he wouldn't outright lie to her. So he didn't. "Yes."

"The Sith made you fall?"

Anakin thought about that and frowned. "No. He tricked me, perhaps, but I made that decision myself. It is one I regret immensely."

She worried her lip between her teeth and wrung her hands but didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Anakin knew what she wanted to ask.

"Yes, I joined the Sith."

She actually gasped and shot to her feet. Anakin sighed.

"You were a—"

"Yes," he cut her off, looking around. He definitely did not want that little tidbit floating around the Temple.

Her skin took on a green pallor and she looked more than a little nauseous. He remained sitting where he was calmly, ready to remind

her that she'd promised not to tell anyone when she ran.

"Does the Council know?" she finally managed to ask.

Anakin relaxed somewhat. "Yes. Well, Master Yoda does."

She nodded at that, and then looked over at him questioningly. She still didn't say anything.

He sighed. "I'm not any different now than I was ten minutes ago. If you have a question, you may ask it."

"It's just...I thought that once someone went dark they...uh..."

"Can't come back?" Anakin finished for her. She nodded sheepishly.

He shook his head. "It is nigh impossible, but not completely so. May I continue or would you like to leave?"

Anakin figured that if he gave her the option that she would feel more in control of the situation. No matter what decision she made, he was willing to live with it so long as she kept her promise. She surprised him by carefully taking her seat again.

"N...no, you can go on."

He suddenly realized just how shaken up she was about this, not that he blamed her, and so he leaned forward, trying to look as earnest and honest as possible.

"It only gets worse from here. I will warn you now. There is no shame in leaving."

She shook her head emphatically. "No, I want to hear."

Well, at least she sounded firmer that time.

"Very well," he said with a nod and leaned against the rock again, double checking that no one was anywhere near them.

Then he started talking again, explaining how his wife and children had died anyway and how, after that, he'd helped Sidious hunt down and destroy the remaining Jedi. He touched on how addictive and twisted the darkside was (although he didn't go into anywhere near the detail he'd gone into with Dooku) and how he helped Sidious rule the Galaxy. How he enforced the Emperor's law with an iron fist and how he would carry out whatever Sidious told him to do. He didn't

say much more than that and hoped that her mind wouldn't go so far as to imagine anything close to what he actually did.

Then he told her of the rebellion and about how one upstart pilot destroyed their new secret-weapon/space station and how he learned that it was his son.

"I thought he died though," Coira protested.

"I thought so too," Anakin confessed.

She nodded quietly and didn't say anything else. He took that as she was ready to continue, so he then spoke of how he'd tried to turn his own flesh and blood and how his son had refused. Right about then was when he realized that speaking like this wasn't nearly as difficult as he had thought it would be. Was that because of what he was going through in his mind-healing sessions, or was it because he was just skipping over so much?

In the end he decided not to look a gift nerf in the mouth and just continued on, thankful that he felt he could without almost giving into his darker tendencies.

He told her, finally, of how his son had turned himself in just so he could confront his father. How they'd fought each other and how his son had almost given in, but stopped at the last minute only to be tortured by Sidious.

"At that point, I had a choice," he commented, completely lost in the past. He had few negative emotions when it came to that part of his life, thankfully, so he had little problem going into more detail. "I had to choose between my Master, my life, and my pride, or my son. I knew that if I chose my son, it would have meant that he'd been right all along and that there was good in me still. It would have meant that I would be turning my back on everything that I'd been working for. Everything that I'd lived for right up until that point would have been utterly wasted."

He paused and shook his head. Almost 25 years as a Dark Lord and he'd still somehow remained naive to an extent. "It wasn't an easy decision."

"But you chose him over everything else, right?" Coira had edged closer and was studying him intently.

He noticed this and edged away uneasily. "Yes."

"What happened next?"

She looked so eager. Part of him wanted to shake his head at how quickly she seemed to get over her fears. Still, he would take the eagerness over her fear of him any day.

"I died. I told him to tell his sister—"

"Sister? How could he have a sister?" she cut in. Anakin found himself torn between annoyance at her interruption and relief that she was acting normally again.

"He had a twin sister. I never met her. I found out just before all of this."

"Oh," the light-haired girl seemed to mull that over for a minute. Then she looked back up at him. "So what did you tell him to tell his sister?"

"That he was right. That I did still have some good in me, and that I died proud of ending the Empire. I died in peace."

"Oh, wow," Coira said with a gentle sigh.

"After that it gets a little fuzzy. I remember meeting my old Jedi Master and him asking me something about whether I had any regrets. Of course I answered yes, and...I woke up on Tatooine, nine-years-old again."

"And now you're trying to make the universe a better place." Coira put her chin in her hand thoughtfully. Probably something she'd seen knights or masters do. It looked very out of place on such a young child. Somehow, Anakin just found it endearing.

"Trying being the key word," Anakin grumbled with a nod. "It isn't easy, trying to prevent a war."

Coira nodded in understanding. "Especially if the Sith are behind it. So are you trying to stop Sidious from becoming Chancellor?"

Anakin shifted uneasily. He didn't want to tell her anything about Palpatine. She would be in the 'Young Jedi Ambassador' program and if he so much as had an *inkling* that she knew anything about him, everything he'd just told her would be blown wide open.

Perhaps he should have thought about this more before he'd told her everything.

"I...can't tell you anything about that."

She put her hands on her hips. "Why not?"

"Because you'll be in danger. And if Sidious suspects anything, he will get it from you. He's an expert at reading emotions and body language, not to mention he can sense things through the Force when even Masters can't sense him. He's a master manipulator, to a point where you don't realize you've been manipulated until his plans come to fruition. And sometimes not even then."

"B-but how can that be?"

Anakin rubbed his eyes. "That's the dark side for you. It encourages deception and he is a master at it."

"Oh. But you've told Master Yoda about him, right?"

This time, Anakin didn't answer. "Look, it is time for dinner," he finally said.

"Anakin, you did tell Master Yoda, didn't you?" she stood as he did, the nervousness and fear that had gradually seeped out of her as he continued with his story came back.

"I will," he promised, "when I have enough proof to go against him. Not everyone will believe that I am a time-traveler, and I want him brought down whether they believe me or not."

Thankfully, she seemed mollified by his words, if a bit uneasy. Then she seemed to catch onto his words and focused on something else.

"Does that mean even Master Yoda doesn't know about how you're from the—"

"No," he cut her off again. Some people had come close to finding them a little earlier, but had gone in another direction. He hadn't sensed anyone else, but he wasn't about to stop being careful. "I didn't think he'd believe me."

Coira cocked her head. "Why wouldn't he?"

"It is a rather hard truth to accept," Anakin said dryly. When Coira opened her mouth to argue, the former Sith decided that enough was enough.

"Look, are we going to go to dinner or not?"

The girl regarded him for a few moments before shaking her head and grabbing her bag. "I still think you should tell him," was all she said as they left the room and headed for the dining hall. Anakin only shook his head and found himself grateful when she didn't say anything else about it for the rest of the night.

If the other initiates noticed how quiet she was during dinner, they didn't say anything.

As he sat and ate his meal, he realized something that made him groan inwardly. He would have to go through with the Young Jedi Ambassador program. He couldn't let all of those younglings head in there with Sidious without some sort of backup. He absolutely *loathed* the idea, but his returning conscience simply wouldn't allow it otherwise.

Stang it.

After dinner, they went their usual ways Anakin he began to prepare for his meeting with Dooku the next day.

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Anakin employed a similar tactic as he had previously to reach Dooku undetected. It only took a wig and an over-sized shirt to cause his small frame to look rather feminine. He didn't want there to be any more similarities between himself now and the boy he'd "sent" before. The less connections he gave to Sidious and his current lackeys the better.

To his surprise and bewilderment (neither were feelings he was particularly used to or fond of, and both had been heaped upon him since he'd returned to the past), the man had not yet eaten and asked Anakin to send a return note.

He didn't like it when things didn't go according to plan (something he'd picked up as the Dark Lord of the Sith), and he had a bad feeling about how his grasp on the situation had changed. Still, there wasn't much he could do but take the flimsy note and walk back out the door towards his hiding spot.

He read the note as soon as he was out of sight.

Did you honestly think I couldn't lose a few tails? Please join me. Tonight's dinner will be my treat.

A feeling, not unlike an itch, began to build somewhere between his lungs and his stomach. Something wasn't right about all of this. He stretched out with the Force again and found that anyone who felt like they could have darker intentions wasn't in any position to be the people he'd been looking for. He felt no trace of his old Master, and he doubted Sidious could truly hide from him if he honestly wished to find the man.

So, reluctantly, he returned to his stash and traded his current costume for his Luke Lars disguise.

Ten minutes later, the host was leading him through the restaurant towards Dooku's table.

The Count didn't even seem to notice when they arrived as he was perusing the menu. Anakin just asked her for a glass of water when she asked if he wished to have anything to drink. She nodded, told them the name of their server (which Anakin promptly forgot) and left.

"You should try the Mosgarian 5 grain nerf soup," the Count said nonchalantly. "If you insist on wearing that mask, then it should be to your liking as it can be sipped through a straw."

Anakin frowned under his mask. "I will take that into consideration."

They sat in silence for several more minutes before the waitress came by and asked them what they wanted. Anakin asked for the soup (ignoring Dooku raising one eyebrow at him in contemplation) while Dooku ordered a seafood dish that Anakin couldn't even pronounce.

After that, they were left to themselves and Dooku finally turned to Anakin.

"Who are you, really?"

The question caught Anakin by surprise. He had most definitely not expected that. "Excuse me?"

"It's a simple enough question: What is your real name?" He said it with perfect politeness, but there was an edge there that Anakin hadn't heard from Dooku in a long time. Since he'd come back in time, actually. What had brought this on? The Count had to have known from the beginning that the name 'Luke Lars' was fake, but he hadn't seemed to have a problem with it before.

Dooku waited calmly while Anakin went over this in his mind. Finally, he opened his mouth.

"Why do you ask?" he answered slowly.

"Because you aren't who you say you are."

Nope, still didn't get any answers. "Forgive me, I assumed you would realize I was using an alias from the beginning."

Dooku conceded with a nod, although it still held a sharpness to it that belied what Anakin had come to know of the man in this time. "Then is it not time for us to move past all of that?"

Something about this was not right at all. The Force confirmed it, but only in small nudges. It wasn't like Anakin was about to be attacked, he would have expected the Force to scream at him then, but there was something.

"While I am like this, I don't like giving my true name to anyone. It is a matter of that paranoia that has kept me alive." And Dooku of all people should understand that. This was really getting on his nerves, so he decided to turn the conversation around. "Why do you want to know so suddenly?"

The older man leaned back nonchalantly. "Is it not natural for a man to want to know with whom he has been conversing?"

"Perhaps, but why now? Why not earlier when you didn't know me at all? Why..." And then it clicked and in seconds, Anakin had swung his legs out from under the table and shot to his feet (not easy to do so without tripping on his stilts, but he managed it). There was only one real reason for him to change his attitude towards Anakin so suddenly —if he got another opinion.

"Oh Force, he got to you."

Instantly, Anakin threw his senses out and tried to figure out where Palpatine was hiding. If he and Dooku were in league...

But he couldn't find anyone. And really, that wasn't fair. Dooku wouldn't turn that quickly...would he? After he'd heard so much from Anakin? Then again, life wasn't fair. And neither was Sidious.

"Please sit down, friend," Dooku was saying in that calming voice he used in diplomatic situations—the one Anakin didn't trust in the

slightest.

"Are you spying for him?" Anakin asked angrily, because really, there was no one else around who it could be. Unless Palpatine really could hide himself that well...

"Of course not," Dooku replied, sounding offended. That, more than anything, seemed to catch Anakin's attention.

So he sat there, just staring at the Count.

"Would you tell me if you were?"

"If I were spying, doubtful. That would, after all, be the point of spying," Dooku muttered just loudly enough for Anakin to hear. "He did ask me, however I refused. He seemed to be very interested in you."

"I'm sure," Anakin grumbled.

"I'm sorry," the hostess that had shown them in approached them warily. "Is there a problem here?"

"My friend remembered something he has to do," Dooku said. "Could we get our order to go?"

"Of course," the hostess said, looking like she didn't believe them in the slightest but obviously wished to avoid a scene. "I'll have your orders brought right out."

Slowly, cautiously, Anakin nodded and retook his seat, but he sat at the edge of the seat, ready to spring into action the moment he got a whiff that anything else was off. Dooku seemed more than willing to sit there in silence.

A few minutes later, their server brought out their orders in some carry-out boxes. Dooku paid her and then they left. Anakin allowed the other to go first, refusing to turn his back to his once enemy.

What was he supposed to do now? He had no idea if Dooku had turned or not, and he couldn't get a feel for the man. He didn't have a bond with him, after all. He was torn between being grateful and resentful of that fact. Having a bond with the Count now could give him insight, and yet the very idea disgusted him.

That didn't really help him with his decision though. Should he just

cut his losses and leave Dooku to Sidious or should he try and continue to talk the man out of making the biggest mistake of his life? On the one hand, Anakin still wanted to keep him out of his former Master's hands, but on the other hand, could he really consider continuing to talk to someone who had connections to Sidious? His instincts told him to drop everything and run, but he didn't want to think that all the effort he'd put into helping Dooku would be for naught.

And no matter what he thought, he couldn't seem to come to a decision.

Once they got outside and into the evening foot traffic (rather sparse at this time of night, thankfully), Dooku turned and regarded him. Anakin returned the gaze evenly.

"Are you Darth Vader?"

Anakin tensed at the question.

"I am not Darth Vader," he hissed. Through the voice modulator it sounded more like a harsh gurgle. It wasn't lost on him that that is how he probably would have sounded when he had been a Sith.

Dooku raised the hand that wasn't carrying any food. "I only ask because...our mutual *friend* says he has never had an apprentice such as yourself. The only apprentice he ever took died at the hands of my Padawan's Padawan."

Anakin shook his head, checking to make sure no one was close enough to hear. "Our 'friend' lies on a daily basis. Do you honestly think he'd tell you the truth about me? He wishes to discredit me, that is all." So much for being completely honest, but he couldn't see another way out of this.

"You are not retracting your claim then?"

The former Sith shook his head, half out of annoyance and half to answer. "No. I did train under him, and everything I have spoken of regarding the Dark Side and the Sith is true."

Dooku seemed to contemplate that as he studied Anakin intently.

"And you will not tell me your true name?"

Anakin sighed. "I cannot."

The Count nodded as if he'd thought as much. Probably had. "You can understand why I find neither one of you easy to trust at this point then. You both fear each other and so either one of you could easily be spouting lies."

The words didn't surprise Anakin, but they did give him an idea. He didn't need Dooku to trust him, he just needed him to distrust Palpatine. He could work with this.

"You must understand that that is the way of the..." he looked around, "the order I trained under. The Apprentice will eventually destroy the Master to obtain their power."

Dooku's eyes narrowed. "Do you plan on destroying him?"

Anakin thought carefully on his answer. "Yes, but not for those reasons. I have told you before that I no longer lust for power, especially not for the sake of power."

"He says he'd just like to speak with you."

The former Sith snorted at that. "No. I've seen what that man can do with words."

"So you won't even try to work it out without violence?" Dooku asked, unimpressed.

"You are still thinking of going about this as a Jedi would. The other order doesn't work like that. If he wants to arrange a meeting, it simply shows that he is at the end of his rope." Which could be both a positive and negative thing, now that Anakin thought about it. "I will not give him that luxury. Besides, as long as I can avoid him, then I have a chance."

With that he turned and walked away.

"Chance of what?" Dooku called after him, sounding puzzled.

Anakin stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "Saving the universe."

"A bit arrogant, aren't you?"

Anakin shrugged. "Perhaps. Or perhaps you have underestimated the lengths he will go to get his way. If you would like to speak with me again, you know how to contact me."

Because he was done. He couldn't continue to take being in the same

space as Dooku and knowing that he might have joined Sidious (even if the chance was rather small at this point) without taking out his lightsaber and attacking him.

First Coira and now this. Everything was falling apart no matter how he tried to keep it all together.

He should have known he couldn't pull this off.

Obi-wan should have known it too.

Dooku didn't answer, choosing instead to watch Anakin walk away. Cursing under his breath, Anakin disappeared as quickly as he could, gave his meal to a beggar on the corner and made his way into the Coruscant underground. He wasn't that hungry anyway. He made sure to lose any tails he might have picked up (including any Dooku himself might have sent) before he took off his false limbs and began crawling through the ventilation system of a particularly large building.

Chapter End Notes

> There we go! Under a month! Ha! And considering that I've been on a bit of a reading streak lately, it might be a bit before the next one is up, but it will be coming! Promise! Thanks again to Khalthar and SPJaymo117 for their awesome work! They helped immensely!
>
> FYI the thing with Coira...just kind of happened. ^^; Sometimes, the characters just take over for me. This was the case here.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jedi Master Adi-Gallia frowned as she glanced over the report on the data pad in front of her and allowed herself to indulge in worrying her bottom lip between her teeth—a habit she'd picked up as a Padawan that tended to show only when she found herself particularly puzzled. She couldn't help but feel both relieved and concerned by what she'd read. On the one hand, Siri seemed to be making progress and healing, but on the other hand Adi had no idea what to make of this new development. None of it made any sense.

Adi's eyes scanned the unofficial note at the end of the report for the umpteenth time as she continued to try and assess the situation with her student. Adi could specifically remember watching her Padawan and feeling pleased at who Siri was becoming: A strong, dependable knight who would be an asset to the Order and the universe at large. That had been just hours before her Padawan had collapsed.

Now Adi hardly recognized Siri. The girl almost seemed like a different person altogether, and was not, by any means, stable. At times, she acted completely normal, if more mature and self aware than Siri had ever been before her coma. Then, in the blink of an eye, she would snap, panic and start babbling about things that made no sense. Some of what she rambled about sent chills up and down Adi's spine. More than once Siri gone on about the Temple's destruction and the Sith taking over the Galaxy. She would often mention someone called 'Vader', although she would never explain just *who* he was, and then go off on a seemingly unrelated subject, like clones, or 'Separatists' or 'Rebels' or (for some reason she couldn't fathom) Master Dooku.

The most disconcerting change in her Padawan, though, were the times when she seemed completely lucid, but would simply get such a sad, mournful look on her face that it broke Adi's heart. During those episodes, the girl would start talking about things as if they didn't exist anymore, if she spoke at all. Adi found those instances most worrying because it showed that Siri's mind had either been damaged far worse than they realized, or the visions she'd received were real. The ramifications of either option went beyond terrifying, and in all honesty, Adi wasn't sure which scenario bothered her more.

And now this? A bond...with an initiate she'd never met? The phenomenon was irrational, unpredictable and frankly disturbing in its suddenness. She'd questioned Siri about it, only to get the run-around as Siri responded vaguely with answers that made little to no sense at all. If Adi hadn't been strictly instructed to not push her Padawan, she would have long since heaped on punishments and demanded a straight answer. The healers weren't sure she could give a straight answer, but Adi knew her Padawan well enough to see that she'd deliberately dodged the questions.

When Adi had finally outright asked for a straight answer, Siri had just looked at her for several seconds as if she wasn't quite sure her Master was there. "It isn't my secret to tell," she'd finally responded and refused to clarify.

The young Master had tried to not let it scare her, but even all of her (not inconsiderable) discipline couldn't stop the anxiety that seeped through her mental shields. Siri was keeping something from her, and Adi knew she couldn't help unless she found out what.

Well, perhaps Anakin Skywalker would have some answers.

It wasn't difficult to track the boy down in between his classes, and so she approached him, managing to bring out a soft smile that usually put children at ease as she called out to him.

"Initiate Skywalker?" The boy paused, as did the fairly large group of initiates he traveled with.

They all stared at her in various stages of shock and awe. She found it amusing. Had she been that way at their age? Probably. If not worse.

The boy in question stepped forward.

"Master Adi-Gallia," he said respectfully. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions," she said.

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly in puzzlement, but he slowly nodded his head and turned to the rest of the group. "Go on without me. I'll catch up."

"Are you sure?" the girl with mouse-brown hair on his right asked quietly, eying Adi warily. Internally, Adi frowned. Why did she suddenly seem protective? Was it because Adi was a Master? Or perhaps an adult? The connotations were not something she liked and

she made a mental note to point it out to their caretaker and créche leader. The Jedi Temple had a zero tolerance policy for people deliberately harming or threatening the children, and having them distrust a Master like that didn't have many other explanations.

Anakin smiled reassuringly. "I can handle myself."

The girl frowned. "Well obviously, but..."

"Go," the boy said with a fond exasperation. It seemed out of place on his young features, as if he were a family member of some sort tolerating and appreciating a younger sibling uselessly speaking up for them.

"If you're sure," a blue-skinned boy said unsurely.

"I am."

"Come on," a larger boy in the back said, his words soft but strong. He simply turned on his heel and continued to walk in the direction they'd been heading towards. The rest of the group finally, if reluctantly, followed him. Adi wondered at their protectiveness. Such bonds spoke of attachment...and that was never a good thing in the Jedi Temple.

She again made a mental note before pushing it to the back of her mind and nodding towards a nearby unused room. Anakin followed her there and inside without hesitation before shutting the door behind them. Adi waited for him to be seated on one of the chairs in the room before she spoke with him.

"Initiate Skywalker," she began. "I'm glad you remember me."

"You are a well-respected Member of the Council. Why would I not?" he asked, tipping his head to one side.

She shrugged. "I am a recent addition to the Council and not very well known."

The boy smiled as if he knew something she didn't. "You will be."

She raised an eyebrow. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

He shrugged. "I was merely stating an opinion."

"Then I thank you," she said with a smile and seated herself facing him. "I actually came to see you today because of your recent

interaction with my Padawan, Siri Tachi."

His smile dimmed ever so slightly, but he didn't lose it. "Yes. I thought someone might ask me about that."

Adi nodded, happy to see that he seemed to be willing to speak with her. "Yes. Her condition is quite baffling and, seeing as you two seem to have formed some sort of bond, I was wondering if you could shed a little light on her condition and perhaps how such a bond could have formed."

For several seconds he just stared at her as his smile faded only to be replaced by a stony expression that showed nothing. She couldn't seem to get a read on his emotions through the Force either and she found herself impressed with his control, if a bit worried. She knew the rumors going around about him—about how he'd been trained before his arrival at the Temple and how he seemed to be extremely advanced for the average Jedi his age.

Finally he answered. "One of the Jedi that found me, Knight Kenobi, introduced me to her when she was still in a coma. I visited her when he couldn't. I believe that both of us had the same vision, and that's why we seem to share a bond," he said softly.

Something about what he said still seemed off to Adi, as if he were hiding something from her, but she couldn't detect what, and he didn't seem to be outright lying. She decided that she couldn't, in good conscience, take his word for the plain truth. Still, he seemed to be willing to give her more information than Siri did, so she'd take what she could get and sort through it all later.

"Really? What kind of a vision?"

He looked down, face grim and posture suddenly stiff. Even though he didn't meet her gaze, she could see that whatever came to mind haunted him.

"I...saw the Jedi Temple on fire. Death choked the air and no one could survive it. They all died. Everyone."

Adi's eyes had widened in shock. How could that be? But what he told her certainly meshed with what Siri had been saying. Instead of reassuring him—she saw that trying to do so would do little good—she took a deep breath and rolled with the punches.

"How did that happen?" she asked.

His lips had thinned into a hard line and he still refused to meet her eyes, watching the floor in front of him as if he could see something in the patterns on the tile.

"The Sith...*a* Sith."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"But...how?" She couldn't imagine any single person, no matter how powerful, managing to take down the entire Jedi order.

"He excelled at hiding and gained the power to do so through manipulation and intrigue. The Jedi were weakened by war and could not stand up to him and his apprentice." The confirmation that at least two people had been involved in the destruction did not calm her fears in the slightest.

"Weakened by war?" she asked, trying to wrap her head around what he was saying.

Anakin simply nodded.

"But...why would the Jedi participate in a war?" she heard herself ask aloud.

For the first time since they'd seated themselves, Anakin turned his head upward and met her gaze. "That is the question."

For several seconds, she just stared at him. For a moment she didn't see a child sitting before her and it was...unsettling.

After a few seconds, she licked her lips and pushed ahead in her questioning. "Who is 'Vader'?"

If he'd been stiff before, he looked positively rigid now. "One of the Sith. The apprentice."

Somehow she felt as if she'd been socked in the gut. It seemed difficult to breathe. No wonder Siri was having such a hard time focusing on the here and now. She'd seen the Sith destroy her home and the best hope for peace in the Galaxy.

"The Emperor?"

His jaw somehow, impossibly, seemed to clench even tighter before he spoke. "The Sith Master who managed to take power."

"Luke?"

That seemed to throw him off. For several seconds, he just stared blankly ahead, as if not seeing anything, and then his entire form relaxed.

"The person who brought the light back."

Adi frowned. That was what Siri had said too.

"Can you explain that for me?"

He almost didn't seem to be speaking to her when he answered, his voice quiet and unfocused. "After years of darkness—decades—he stood against it. He shouldn't have won, but he did, because he took after his mother. So good, so pure, so willing to risk everything to save a soul that didn't deserve to be saved."

"What soul?"

Anakin blinked and seemed to return to the present. He glanced up at her and then shook his head, indicating that he either didn't know, or couldn't speak of it. She didn't press him. He'd already given her quite a bit to think about.

"You said this 'Luke' took after his mother. Do you know who his mother was?" If the smile on his face gained any more sadness, she would be shocked he wasn't crying.

"Not a Jedi."

She nodded. That wasn't a surprise. Still, she knew very well that even retaining that kind of information from a vision was unusual. He'd already been able to give details that most Jedi wouldn't be able to remember. It must have been an extremely vivid vision. That...did not bode well for their future.

She regarded him for several seconds, suddenly aware of just how young he looked. She couldn't help but feel sorry that he'd had this vision—a vision a trained almost-knight couldn't even seem to keep straight. No wonder he seemed so much older and sadder than his age group. No wonder everyone seemed to want to help him and protect him. He had to have nerves of steel and a nigh-unfathomable mental capacity to be handling this as well as he had.

"Who else knows about this?" she asked.

His answer worried her.

"I don't know, anymore."

"Have you told Master Yoda?"

He frowned, looking troubled. "I think so?" The fact that he couldn't seem to remember obviously bothered him. This vision seemed to play with a person's reality perception.

She reached a hand out and placed it on his arm. "Do I have your permission to discuss this with him? We may come back for more answers."

Instead of biting his lip or looking worried or grateful, she found herself surprised that his face turned stony again, showing no emotion.

"That would be acceptable."

She smiled at him. He seemed so mature. Just what had this vision done to him?

"You're an amazing person, Anakin," she said softly. "You are living and dealing with something that has driven other people mad." As much as she hated to admit it, she never had been fond of dodging or sugar-coating the truth. "Please don't be too hard on yourself for doing the best you can, and know that if you ever need help, you can come to me. I have been working with Siri a lot and maybe I can help you too."

He regarded her with that blank expression for several seconds before he nodded. He didn't smile but he did seem to relax and she would have sworn his features softened ever so slightly.

"Thank you," he said.

"Let me walk you to class," she said as she rose. "I can excuse your tardiness."

That did get a small smile out of him. It didn't seem as fake or pushed as his previous smiles and she counted that as a victory.

"That would be greatly appreciated."

xXx

Anakin felt like he'd been strapped to the nose of a speeder and then driven around for the week. The last few days had had so many high and low points that he seemed to have lost any control he had. His emotions had taken roller coaster rides like nothing else and it didn't seem as if this state would stop any time soon. It was...exhausting.

Still, his discussion with Adi-Gallia earlier that day had bolstered his spirit. Maybe he wouldn't have to worry about getting proof to convince the Jedi Council about Palpatine after all. He hoped so. The sooner he could convince them, the better.

With that thought lightening his mind, he focused back on the hallway in front of him and remembered where he was going. Another mind-healing session with Master Xio. As emotionally drained as he felt, he wasn't sure he was up to another session. However, he'd decided that he wouldn't back down from talking to D-40 about his past and working through what he needed to while he still could. He'd still decided that he was going to talk about something safe this week. Actually, he already had a bit of a plan and that alone gave him the nerve to show up. He'd seriously considered postponing the whole thing, but knew that he would only be putting off the inevitable. Besides, the idea of just running away without a good reason bothered him greatly.

That plan almost completely fizzled out when he opened the door and saw who, besides Master Xio, was sitting there. He felt his feet move to turn 180 degrees and only Master Xio's calm acknowledgment of his arrival stopped him.

"Anakin! Right on time, as always. Please, come in."

He hesitated. How could he not reconsider? Because sitting right in front of him, stern and stoic as ever, was Mace Windu.

Master Xio must have noticed his pause because she gestured to her 'guest'. "Anakin, this is Mace Windu. I know you've already met, but I wanted to introduce you personally to a few Jedi outside of your age group in a more personal setting. If you're not comfortable, we can reschedule."

He almost said yes. But that would make Mace even more suspicious than he already was, so he took a deep breath and shrugged. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"Are you sure?" the white-haired woman asked cautiously as Anakin strode inside and picked his usual armchair, which happened to sit

across from the Council Member.

"Yes," he managed to get out, trying to keep the memories of the man at bay (with little success). He had very few positive thoughts or feelings towards Mace Windu, and the fact that he last time he'd seen the man before waking in the past, he'd been falling away, minus one hand and betrayed by a fellow Jedi...

Anakin closed his eyes for a moment and then looked down. No, no he wouldn't think of that. He'd think of anything else and ignore the sweet whisper of the darkness that called out to him...

"Alright," Master Xio continued, voice firm but eyes still wary, "I know this is a little sudden, but I asked you to come up with some questions you wished to ask some of the older Jedi. Did you do so, Anakin?"

Yes, he had, but he didn't want to ask Mace Windu of all people how he meditated or what he thought of the Council and its mandates. That was a recipe for trouble if he'd ever seen one.

Slowly he nodded his head, though.

"I would be happy to answer any questions you have," Mace said with what Anakin figured was supposed to be a friendly smile. It did soften his rather hard face, but nothing could ever truly get rid of Mace Windu's stern expression. At least nothing he'd ever seen.

Anakin nodded and would have licked his lips, but he refused to show any sign of weakness around this man, and so he sat with his back straight and hands in his lap as he wracked his brain for something fairly neutral that he could ask this particular person.

"What is it like, to be a Jedi Master?" he finally settled on. Then he realized that he sounded old again. It had been happening more and more lately. He would slip into the speech patterns he was most used to, and that happened to be high-class Empire era political speech. The children seemed to find it amusing, so he hadn't been watching himself so much lately, but around Mace...

The dark-skinned Jedi didn't seem to mind at all, thankfully. "Well, it's a lot of work. A Jedi Master has to hold themselves to the highest standards and stick to them. This goes double for the Council because they have to make decisions regarding the entire Order. It isn't easy but we do our best."

Anakin wanted to scoff. Hold themselves to the highest standard, huh?

Like allowing themselves to be pulled into a war that goes against everything their order stands for? Or like letting themselves be bullied into allowing a less-than-legal lawsuit regarding a Padawan go to the normal Courts instead of handling it internally? Like not standing up against the Senate when they needed to? Like confronting and trying to kill the Chancellor because he was also the enemy they'd been searching for instead of capturing him to make him stand trial?

Sitting in front of Mace Windu seemed to take his emotional strain and multiply it by a thousand or so. Even Obi-wan didn't gain this kind of reaction anymore. Probably because, unlike with Obi-wan, Anakin had rarely been on truly civil terms with Mace. He also found it far worse when one-on-one versus standing in front of the Council, for some reason he could not fathom.

He did his best to put on a thoughtful face and decided that maybe he would go for broke. He doubted he'd be able to hold back on his (decades old) grudge against the man in front of him, so why not at least get an honest opinion?

"What do you think of the relationship between the Jedi and the Senate?" he asked, more than aware that he'd set foot on shaky ground.

Mace seemed to be taken back by the question. Served him right.

"That's an interesting question," he said slowly. "I'm guessing you're asking because of the Ambassador program?"

Anakin nodded, trying to look as neutral as he possibly could.

"Well, the Senate represents the systems in the Republic. We serve the people of the Republic and often have to work in tandem with the Senate to fulfill that role."

"How far does that go?"

Instantly, Anakin knew he'd gone too far. The scowl on Mace's face and surprise on Xio's alerted him to that.

"What do you mean?" Mace asked slowly.

Anakin felt worry overcoming his anger and backed down. It took him a few seconds to find a good explanation, but find one he did. "It was something Master Qui-gon said," he muttered. "He said that Jedi have lost sight of who they serve. They serve the Senate and those in power

more than they serve the people who really need them. I...didn't understand at the time, and I'm not sure I do now. I...was hoping you could explain that."

Thankfully, it seemed to put their minds at ease and they relaxed.

"I see," Mace said, looking troubled. "Well, Master Qui-gon was a very good man and a very good Jedi, but he didn't always see eye-to-eye with the Council."

Anakin cocked his head to the side. It didn't escape his notice that Mace hadn't answered the question, but he decided to let it slide in light of the new direction the conversation had taken. "What do you mean?"

The older Jedi looked down for a minute and Anakin caught sadness there...or at least he thought he did. He'd never thought Mace Windu had time for such emotions and it startled him to see it here.

"He liked to question the Council's authority. He'd always bother us about decisions we made or orders we gave. We more or less got used to it. Sometimes I miss it because he made us think. With him and his Master both gone, we don't have many people to do that anymore."

Anakin thought about that, his own anger almost completely gone (almost). "So every Jedi has the same opinion now?" he asked carefully, hoping that would be what a child would come up with next.

Mace smiled. It still looked sad. "No, of course not. We just don't have many people that wish to question the code."

And there was his opening. "But, if you don't question things, how can you find out what's right?"

The Council Member cocked his own head, studying Anakin for a moment before he answered. "The Jedi Order has been around for thousands of years. We try to take what we've learned and pass it on, just like every other order. The Code as we have it today is what has helped us not just survive, but thrive. Most Jedi don't question the Code because it works."

Anakin made a showing of thinking on that. He was aware that he was blatantly manipulating Mace, but couldn't bring himself to really care. Perhaps it had been difficult to do so as of late (due to having the brain of an 11-year-old), but while he'd never be up to Obi-wan's

caliber, he'd learned no small amount of negotiating politics in the Empire.

"So, the Jedi Code will always be right for every Jedi forever?" he finally asked.

There was the blank look he'd been hoping for. "I don't know."

Well, at least he was honest. Anakin tried to look confused (and not triumphant or smug). "It won't be?"

He shook his head. "I don't know that either."

Anakin tried to look as if he were working something out. "So the Code has always been like it is today?"

Mace's expression loosened ever so slightly. "No. It's changed and adapted until we found what works the best."

"So the Jedi of old didn't have the right Code?"

Mace seemed to think on that for a moment. "I don't think so, no."

"Did they think so?"

Okay, maybe this was leading a bit, but he hoped he'd be able to pass it off with childlike innocence. It seemed to be working so far in any case.

"I would like to think they did the best they could."

Anakin nodded but still held to his furrowed brow and slight frown. "When did they know they had to change?"

Mace's own frown grew pronounced. "I beg your pardon?"

The Initiate took that as a chance to explain. "Well if they did the best they could, they thought they had the right Code, but you said it was different then. What made them change?"

The dark-skinned Jedi's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Tragedies they couldn't prevent with their system."

Check.

"Oh! So the Code today prevents all tragedy!" He grinned as if he'd just put everything together.

The older man shook his head. "No, Anakin. There isn't a system that can prevent all tragedy. We can only prevent as much as we can and adapt to the changing culture of the Galaxy as a whole."

He quirked his head again. "So the Code doesn't prevent all the problems?"

Mace shook his head. "No."

"Then...how do you know it's right?"

The Council Member was looking rather flustered at this point. Anakin wouldn't have picked up on it if he hadn't known Mace Windu as well as he did.

"The Force wills it."

Check.

Anakin scratched his head. "But Master Qui-gon said he followed the will of the Force. If he did and you do, shouldn't everyone have agreed?"

The flustered look sharpened. "Sometimes people get confused and don't realize they're not following the will of the Force."

"Oh. Then how do you know you're following the will of the Force?"

"It will tell you."

"But everyone hears different things and so they argue?"

He could have sworn Mace shot a 'help me' look to Master Xio who seemed completely content to sit back and watch the two of them 'discuss' things.

"No," Mace said, trying to stay calm. "People hear their own wants and their own needs and sometimes think that is the will of the Force."

That...was actually a rather good answer. And rather true. Anakin could vouch for that himself, unfortunately.

Well played.

"So how can you tell the difference?"

To Anakin's surprise, a slight smirk edged onto Mace's face.

"Meditation."

Munition.*

Had he been truly ten, Anakin would have made a face. Now, though, he just blinked at the man in front of him and refused to let any of his own frustration or disappointment with the answer show.

He still had a few tricks up his sleeve, though. "So what if the Force tells someone to do something against the Code? Are we supposed to follow the Force or the Code?"

Anakin could tell Mace wanted to say something along the lines of 'that would never happen', but even he couldn't delude himself that much.

Check.

"That has actually been the subject of a lot of controversy," Mace said slowly, looking at Anakin as if seeing him for the first time. He'd probably realized just how much Anakin had led that conversation.

"I see," Anakin said softly, tapping his chin with his finger. "What do you think?"

"I think the Code is there for a reason and that we should learn from the mistakes of our past," Mace finally answered.

The initiate cocked his head to the side in what he hoped looked like confusion. "So you think that we should follow the Code, even if the Force tells us otherwise?"

Mace's lips thinned. "Perhaps we should discuss something else."

Ah, no. He wasn't going to get out of the game by ending it prematurely. Anakin decided to pull the 'new kid' card and shrank back. "I'm sorry. You said to ask anything. I...didn't mean to offend. I...just wanted to know."

The older man sighed ever so slightly . "You didn't offend me. And to answer your question, I think that there are exceptions to the rules, but they should be held as exceptions, not the rule."

"So," Anakin said, his voice quiet, "If the Force said to change something, you would, but follow the Code otherwise?"

Mace nodded firmly, a pleased expression crossing his face as he sat

back in his chair. "Precisely."

Checkmate.

"So, Follow the Force before anything else and use the Code as a guideline. Right, got it. Thank you for answering my questions."

Mace looked surprised. "You're welcome," he answered, almost automatically.

Anakin would take that as a win.

Master Xio leaned forward. "Is that all you wanted to ask?"

Anakin blinked over at her as if he didn't quite comprehend what she'd said. Then he hit the side of his fist into the palm of his hand in front of him. "Oh, yeah. I wanted to know...what will happen to me if I don't get picked to be a Padawan? Will I be able to go home and see my Mom?"

At that one, Mace and Xio exchanged glances before Mace leaned forward. "About that," he said slowly, not looking pleased at all. "Normally when initiates come to the Temple, they are encouraged to let their past go so no one can have bias or attachments. That can be difficult after a certain age and that's why we don't normally let children over the age of 5 into the Temple. Even that can be considered too old.

"But remember how I said there are exceptions to the rule?"

Anakin blinked at him in pure shock. Just where was he going with this? He almost seemed...*understanding.* Anakin couldn't help his surprise as that certainly hadn't happened the first time...

"Yes," he said cautiously, not liking that he didn't know where this would lead.

"Well, we've decided that you should be one of them. We've set it up so that we'll contact your mother twice a year."

Anakin felt his mouth drop ever so slightly and he began to wonder if he was seeing (and hearing) things. Because Mace Windu would never allow for something like that. Just...why?

"Anakin?" Master Xio cut in worriedly when he didn't respond. "We know it's not much, but we realize it wasn't fair to make you want to

change your life like that. If you can know that your mother is safe, maybe that would help you in the areas you're struggling in. She can give you support that we, as Jedi, simply do not know how to give."

He just continued to stare at them and wondered how in the Universe this had happened. He never would have thought in a million years that they'd allow him to contact his mother.

"Y...you mean it?" he finally asked, almost not daring to hope.

Master Xio nodded, a soft smile on her face. Master Windu gave a short, sharp nod. "Yes."

Any anger he had towards Mace Windu was suddenly replaced by a gratefulness and something that felt like (dare he think it) hope. Maybe the Jedi could change after all.

"Thank you," he whispered softly already looking forward to speaking with his Mother again. "I...don't think I can thank you enough."

"You just keep doing your best," Master Xio said with a grin. "Even if you don't get chosen as a Padawan, we will do everything we can to help both you and her. We've already made arrangements to have her released and moved to a core world."

"Really?" he asked, injecting as much excitement as he could into that. He did have a role to play still, after all. It wasn't difficult to conjure the emotions necessary.

They nodded and a relief began to flood through Anakin until he remembered his deal with Jango Fett. He made a mental note to contact him as soon as he possibly could and get this hammered out. He wasn't sure whether he should hope that his mother had been rescued and released as of yet or not. In the long run, he supposed, it didn't matter. She would be freed and that was what mattered.

"When?" he asked.

"Within the next few months."

So he still had some time. Good.

"Well," Mace said at that point. "If you don't have any more questions..." he looked over at Anakin expectantly and the younger Jedi shook his head. "Then it's been enlightening speaking with you, Initiate Skywalker. Unfortunately, I must attend to other duties."

"Oh, thank you, Master Windu!" Anakin blurted as he stood and bowed, for once not feeling any resentment in doing so. "Thank you for everything!"

"You're welcome, Initiate." And he actually almost sounded genuine. Would wonders never cease?

"Have a good day," Mace said finally as he strode to the door. "If you have any more questions, please don't hesitate to ask. Just, make sure I have enough time to think and prepare when you do?"

"Yes, of course!" Anakin said hurriedly and then watched the door close after the Master, feeling like he'd been left floundering. For the first time, he really didn't know how to react to Mace Windu.

He sat back down and continued to try and process everything that had just happened.

"Anakin," Master Xio said softly, drawing his attention to her.

"Yes?"

She studied him intently, as if he were a puzzle she couldn't figure out. "How many masks do you wear?"

He blinked. "I'm sorry?"

The older Jedi shook her head. "Don't think I didn't see what you did. You had control over the conversation most of the time and you led Master Windu where you wanted him to go. You usually speak far more intelligently than what you showed and...well, I was sure a lot of what you were showing us before was a mask you used for protection. What I just saw was something completely different. I don't think you're lying to us, but...How many masks do you wear?"

He thought about that for a moment and then decided to answer truthfully. "However many I need to."

xXx

It was with no small amount of relief (or a sort of numb shock that he still needed to process through) that he sat down across from D-40. Master Yoda had come in just a few minutes after Mace had left, but Anakin couldn't, for the life of him, remember most of the rest of the meeting.

That worried him, but not enough for him to do anything about it.

But that was all over now and he could get on with his day. He had his safe topic to discuss: his family. He'd only really gotten to his time as a Padawan during his previous session, but while he liked the idea of sharing things in chronological order, he really wasn't up to it today. Between the depression and rejection he'd constantly felt as a youngling at the Temple that first time around, he doubted he could make it through that in his current mood without reverting to his dark-side ways.

So he would talk about the best things that had happened to him. He informed the droid of this, and then launched into a description of Padmé, beginning the story of how he'd met her. It was easy to get lost in the memories—those no longer tainted by darkness.

After a good half an hour (he could have talked longer on the subject, easily) the droid asked if he would like to speak on another matter. At that point, he moved over to Luke and spoke of how amazing his son was. He avoided sad thoughts about how he'd hurt his child or how he'd hunted him, or even how there was a good chance he wouldn't exist in this universe, but instead expounded on how steadfast Luke stayed and how quick of a study he'd been. He spoke with pride about how well his son had performed time and time again. He wished he was more like his son.

Then, just before they would wrap up, the robot tilted its head to one side. "You have spoken a great deal about your...future relationships, except for your daughter. You did mention you had one."

Anakin blinked. "Yes, I did. She...well, I never met her. Luke told me about her just before I died." More or less. "I never even knew her name or what she looked like."

Although, she must have been in the Rebellion or somehow related to the Rebellion if Luke had discovered his connection to her around that time. It would stand to reason. He supposed they could have met on a scouting or surveillance mission, but somehow he didn't think so. The way his son had felt about her seemed *familiar* in a way that long-distance just didn't cut. No, she had to have been in the Rebellion.

He wondered if he'd ever met her. As he recalled from the wanted list, there were a few women who had hair and eye color similar to Luke's. But then they wouldn't have had to look like him necessarily. He and Padmé looked rather different. Maybe she had blond hair and brown

eyes. Or brown hair and blue eyes. Or brown hair and brown eyes.

There were a lot of people who fit that description, up to and including the Alderaan Princess.

His mind froze on that thought for some reason.

And then he started piecing it together. She was adopted. That was well known. He'd always suspected she had some Force potential, but had dismissed the idea because whether she did or not, she was untrained and wouldn't have been a problem. But there were those eyes looking up at him in defiance...those brown eyes...

Oh, Force.

Oh, *Force!*

They'd hidden his daughter—his own daughter—right underneath his nose. He'd known her, interacted with her...*tortured* her...

For several seconds he just sat there in shock.

Not a minute later, up in the healer's wing, Siri Tachi screamed.

Chapter End Notes

*Seeing as Dejerik is similar to chess, I decided to use chess terms. However, the term for 'castle' isn't really something that they'd probably use, seeing as it's a futuristic, non-earth-based society. So I looked up other terms and that one seemed to work well enough. Basically, in this instance, Anakin was acknowledging a sneaky move similar to a 'castle' in chess.

AN: Sorry for the long wait. One of my beta reader's computers died on him and I had some things come up at work and in life and...well, here it is. Long chapter. Enjoy.

Thank Khalthar and SPJaymo117 for this! Seriously, they help me SO much!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 25

Siri didn't know what had changed. Whenever she'd felt like this before, the memories and visions had overwhelmed her thoughts so intensely that it had caused her to almost pass out multiple times. She would then babble whatever came to her mind, if only to stay awake because she somehow knew that being lost in those dreams would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to her.

This time, though, it felt different. The darkness was there, she could tell, and the visions continued to clamor in the back of her mind for attention, but she didn't lose her sense of the present and found she could anchor herself in it instead of being lost to the maelstrom of memories. So when a healer ran in to check on her, she managed a weak smile and an apology for her scream, telling him it was just a nightmare. The healer, a rather young one (probably still a Padawan), didn't look convinced, but he still accepted her explanation and left after she assured him there was nothing he could do for her.

She shook her head and watched him leave with that fake smile still plastered on her features. The moment he was out of sight, she swung her legs out of bed and walked over to the window. The darkness was growing. Although it still felt small at the moment, she could feel its creeping infection around her.

And she knew it all led back to Anakin.

Muttering a few choice (and rather colorful) words under her breath, she leaned forward and rested her head on the transparisteel. She didn't really see the view as she concentrated on her breathing and the calming flow of the Force around her.

It helped, but only marginally.

Setting her mouth in a grim line, she realized that she couldn't count on the problem—the situation in general—to resolve itself anymore. Something would have to be done.

Which was fine. She never had been the type of person to just sit by

and let things happen anyway.

xXx

For once, Obi-wan had a rather simple mission, and so far, nothing had gone awry. He had been tasked to guarding a royal girl from the planet Mak-toh as she attended some peace treaties with the other planets in her system. It really wasn't his usual type of mission, as the girl had legally inherited the throne when her mother, the empress, had died from a chronic illness. The council didn't expect anything to go wrong, so Obi-wan had been sent alone.

Honestly, he couldn't remember the last time any of his missions had gone this smoothly, and it was beginning to unnerve him. He didn't like to think he was paranoid, but that had to be at least part of the reason he felt so unusually jumpy...and grumpy, now that he thought about it. Did he really crave excitement that much? Or was it something else?

He stood behind the girl, blending in with the servants as he scrutinized everyone at the table for the umpteenth time. Finally, he took a deep breath, centered himself, and reached for the Force. After a few moments, he realized that whatever had affected him like this was not on the planet. If anything, it seemed to call him from far away...towards Coruscant and the Jedi Temple…

Just what was going on? Who would—

A tap on the shoulder brought him out of his reverie, and he blinked at a servant he'd befriended a little while before. He stood there with one eyebrow raised as he gestured towards a tray with several different types of appetizers.

Thanking him, Obi-wan popped a few into his mouth and went back to doing his job. Whatever was on Coruscant was on Coruscant, and he could do nothing about it right now. So he'd do what Qui-Gon had always told him to do and focus on the here and now.

It didn't stop him from worrying, though.

xXx

Anakin didn't wait for the door to open at his approach. Instead he wrenched it open with the Force and strode into the larger room, fists balled and posture rigid. Anyone who had seen Lord Vader like this would have known to stay out of his way. Anyone who hadn't known

soon learned or lost the need to learn as their existence tended to end at that point.

It had been a while since he'd been like this. He didn't feel the all-consuming anger (and subsequent darkness) that he usually found himself lost in, but even if he had, he wouldn't have cared. All of his emotion now focused on two individuals, one of which happened to be in front of him.

"You!" he growled, seething at the little green troll who seemed torn between wariness towards Anakin and some form of concentration. Anakin didn't really care which at the moment.

"Anakin?!" He heard Master Xio exclaim in the background but ignored her. If she became a threat, he could eliminate her.

"You dare?!" he asked the grandmaster scornfully. "You and your high-and-mighty Jedi ways, always insisting on holding to a double standard!"

"Wish to discuss something with me, you do?"

The lack of reaction in the other being's voice only angered him further. "Yes! I will only ask once more: how *dare* you?! You and Kenobi and the Jedi!" He wanted to throw himself at the traitorous Master and strangle him, but somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized that attacking Yoda was a bad idea. He was in the heart of the Jedi Temple without any backup and greatly diminished in skill. That little voice of reason was all that held him back from flinging everything he could at the object of his wrath.

"Anakin—" Master Xio started again, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand, pushing her back against the wall—not hard enough to do permanent damage, but hopefully hard enough that she would get the hint and stay out of this. She was lucky he was merciful enough (and distracted enough) to not do more at the moment.

"Do not interfere," he warned.

"Explain, you should," Yoda said, his voice cold and demanding. Jedi Padawan Anakin Skywalker would have shrunk away from that and then angrily complied. Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker would have refused on the mere principle, and Vader would have just taken out his lightsaber and cut the Master down. The current Anakin, though, didn't have access to a weapon and realized that while he *wanted* to fight physically—even if that was what Vader would have done—he

simply did not have the capacity at the moment. His only other option was to fight with words. Fortunately, while young Anakin Skywalker hadn't been particularly gifted in that area, Vader had been schooled enough to know what he was doing...if he could keep his temper in check.

"You hid her from me! Hid both of them, really, but at least Luke wasn't *flaunted* before me! I do not know which I find more abhorrent; that you hid her where she would still be in danger, or that you took her from me to begin with! Do you not proclaim to want to protect all life in the galaxy? So then why do Jedi constantly pick and choose as to which lives are more important?! You seem to have some innate tendency to judge which lives can be spared and which can be tossed into the very heart of darkness and left to wither!"

He waited in silence, breathing hard, for Grandmaster to respond, fists clenched so tightly that he could feel the nails biting into his palm.

"Not speaking of another, are you," Yoda finally asked...or said, in such a calm, sad tone that Anakin couldn't help but be taken back.

"I... What?" he asked, noting somewhere how utterly pathetic he suddenly sounded.

"Left you in darkness, did we?" the small master asked as his ears drooped.

Anakin wondered just how Yoda had been able to turn the tables on him so quickly and thoroughly, because the grandmaster was right. Yes, he'd been angry at them about his daughter (who wouldn't be?), but that last line that he'd yelled at them had encompassed himself, as well. He hadn't *meant* for it to, but it had happened.

Worse, he didn't know how to answer Yoda's question because there were so many answers. They had left him in the darkness—had abandoned him and so many other slaves to their fate until they'd had reasons that benefited them. They'd left Shmi to make her own way on a planet that had robbed her of everything else, without even allowing Anakin to check on her. They'd left Luke on that same planet—a planet that was, arguably, just as dangerous as that which they'd been trying to hide him from. They'd left Leia (and he'd *chosen* that name too! Really, how could he not see it?) smack in the middle of everything to fend for herself. They'd left Padmé to die and they'd left Anakin to burn on an abandoned planet only to be consumed by the darkness so thoroughly that it took a miracle to allow him out.

They hadn't just left *him* in darkness, but, really his whole family.

No wonder he hated the Jedi.

Jedi weren't *supposed* to be like that! They were supposed to be *good* and *right*, and not...well, people.

Anakin shook his head. That didn't make any sense, because he *knew* better. He'd known for decades—since he first came to the Temple, really. But maybe—just maybe—he'd never really given up on the ideal, because he still wanted rescuers to come and save him. He always had (and wasn't that hard to admit, even to himself?). So when no one had come, he'd fought for himself and tried to live up to that expectation, only to fail miserably—because, really, could *anyone* live up to that ideal? Was that fair of him to demand of anyone else?

Was that fair of him to demand it of himself?

But wait, didn't the Jedi demand that of him, too? Their precious Chosen One?

He reached a hand up to rub at the bridge of his nose and tried to break through the circular thinking. Focus. What had Yoda asked? Right, if they'd left him in the darkness. What a ridiculous question.

"How can you ask me that?" he heard himself reply.

"Hmm," Yoda replied, nodding his head gravely. "Understand now, I do, why so worried, you were."

Anakin stopped for a moment and tried to process that comment, because it didn't seem to be related to anything they'd been discussing. So worried about what? Being left in the darkness? No... Well, knowing Yoda, probably that, too, but not *just* that. Then what...?

Oh. The shield. The reason Yoda was even here to begin with. Palpatine.

Right.

He swallowed, but his fear didn't overpower his anger, not completely. It still lingered in the back of his mind and soul. It, thankfully, still wasn't the completely tainted, irrational anger, at least, but Anakin knew frome experience that if he didn't do something about it now, it would eventually become something he no longer wished to deal with.

Before he could do anything else, though, the door to the room opened, and everyone turned to look at the newcomer.

To Anakin's great surprise, Siri Tachi, dressed in nothing but a medic-wing tunic and a brown outer robe, strode into the room, looking determined. He briefly wondered why she was there, because he could still feel Yoda's shield up (thankfully). Then he realized it had to be that blasted, unknown bond.

"Anakin Skywalker!" she practically shouted, looking more like an avenging angel than a Jedi.

"Who are you?" Master Xio asked, sounding exasperated. Siri ignored her and Yoda as she marched up to Anakin, finger pointing directly between his eyes. "How *dare* you! You promised me you'd be careful! You *promised*!"

For a moment, he felt chagrined. How she might be affected by all of this hadn't even crossed his mind, and he really should think about things like that because not doing so (thinking about how other people would react to him) had been what had gotten him in trouble in the first place.

As he stared at her, though, a thought occurred to him even as he mentally went over her words again, so accusing and hurt and... Was that fear? If that were true, she was putting on an extremely convincing front. Still, if she could hide that, then what else could she hide?

"Did you know?" he asked, not wanting to believe she would keep something so vital from him.

She must have sensed the accusation (and desperation, even if he refused to acknowledge it) because she paused, hand lowering slightly. "

Know what?" she asked.

He couldn't help but appreciate that she'd had the presence of mind and willingness *to* ask at this point. Or, at least, he would appreciate it when he looked back on the situation later. At the moment, all he cared about was the answer she would give.

"Luke's twin sister."

She blinked blankly at him and didn't say anything. Out of the corner

of his eye, he saw Yoda raise a hand to stop Master Xio from interfering. He filed that away for later because right now, he had to know who he could trust, and if he couldn't trust Siri—the only other person who really *knew* what he'd gone through—then he didn't know who he could. Would he just end up back at square one? Unable to trust anyone and unable to move forward because of it?

When she remained mute, he decided to elaborate, not caring who overheard him at this point.

"Apparently they were separated at some point in their childhood and the girl—*my daughter*—was taken to Alderaan to be raised as Princess Leia Organa. Did you know?"

Siri continued to stare at him, her brow furrowing in thought—Anakin didn't know whether she was contemplating if she could hide what she knew from him, or outright trying to remember. He could tell just about everything *else* from their bond, but not this. Stupid, unpredictable, light-sided—

Siri shook her head. "If I did know, I didn't remember. With her presence in the Force and the actions she took, it makes sense, but no, I didn't know. Not since I woke up here in any case."

For several seconds Anakin scrutinized her, analyzing every movement and every twinge that came from her through the Force. Finally he concluded that he felt no lie from her. She was telling the truth. He deflated somewhat.

"She was right there in front of me the whole time," he told her. "Right under my nose. How did I not notice?"

Siri took a few more steps towards him, nowhere near as angry as she had been, thankfully.

"You know it's a good thing you never found out, right?" she asked kindly.

He slumped even further, sinking down into the chair behind him.

"Yes, I do. But...I tortured her, Siri."

"Wait, what?" she asked, taking a step back.

Anakin put a hand up to his face, partially wanting to hide, partially wanting something else to focus on. "When the plans for the Death

Star were stolen, I tracked it to her. She knew where the Rebel Base was. I...had to get that information so I...I... Oh, Force."

For several seconds, they sat in a numb silence as Siri processed that. It took her a moment to gather her nerves. After she did, she knelt down before him, putting his head more or less level with hers.

"Anakin," she said softly, "look at me."

He did so, and he saw her catch her breath. He knew how he must look right now, far too old for the face he wore. Too haunted. Too broken. Too worthless...

"Anakin, that isn't you anymore. You said so yourself," she said, firmly but kindly.

He shook his head. "How can you say that? How when I did—"

"No," she interrupted. "Focus on me—on the here and now."

"I...can't," he protested. "I was so happy when I found out about them —when I found out I was going to be a Father. And then I... Why? Why did I let him manipulate me like that? I loved them so much but they were better off without me in their lives, and that *kills* me."

"Stop it!" Siri snapped, reaching out and flicking Anakin in the forehead. He blinked, surprised, and absentmindedly rubbed the stinging area with his hand. "Stop pulling an Obi-wan, all guilty and thinking you have to take the worlds on your shoulders and carry them all by yourself."

Another tense silence fell for several seconds before Anakin managed a slight, if watery and rather cynical, smile. "But isn't the Chosen One supposed to save the worlds?"

Her mouth thinned. "No. You're supposed to balance the Force. Besides, no one ever said you had to do it alone."

He didn't know what to say to that. Oh, he'd heard it before, from Obi-wan, Padme and even Ahsoka, but somehow it seemed to mean more right now, and he couldn't pinpoint why. Did he really not have to do this alone? Could he delegate the burden? Well, yes, he'd always known he *could*...or he thought he did, but in the back of his mind he'd known this burden was his and his alone.

And yet, the way Siri had said that...he could have sworn she was

channeling Obi-wan—their Obi-wan. For the first time in a very long time, he truly missed his old master.

And for the first time in a very long time, he listened.

"And anyway, I also don't recall anyone saying you had to do it right now," she continued. "Stop demanding so much of yourself and start being a little more realistic."

And with that, he found he could let his anger go. Really let it go, for the first time. It didn't all leave, and he knew he would continue to be tempted, but he had no other reason to let go than that he just didn't want to be angry anymore.

Somehow, just having her there to talk him down did more to calm him than just about anything else could. Hadn't he just realized he wanted someone to come and save him? Isn't that what she'd done? In his mind, he suddenly got a brand-new image to go along with the phrase 'knight in shining armor.'

"Thank you, Knight Tachi," he whispered, suddenly as calm as he'd ever been. He even managed a small, fond smile. It amused him when his reaction seemed to take the wind out of her sails.

"Wait," she said, freezing in place and blinking as her mind furiously tried to keep up with the situation. "Did you just...thank me?"

He scoffed. "You were obviously just imagining things. Besides, did you honestly think you could waltz down here...in that—" he eyed the short tunic with a raised eyebrow— "without so much as a weapon to stop me?"

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" she asked, although he did notice that she quickly shoved the gap of her robe (and just where had she gotten that?) closed. His comment also seemed to bring Siri back to herself and she looked around, noting where she was and who else was in the room. Her face paled before a very red hue suddenly rose in her cheeks.

"M-master Yoda! And Master..." she faded off, obviously not knowing the other Jedi in the room.

"Tai'k Xio," the older human said with a polite nod, although her gaze lingered on Anakin. She wore an unreadable expression that he suspected did not bode well for them.

Then he realized what he'd just said and done, what Siri had said and done, and just what the consequences of his actions would be. For a moment he just stared straight ahead before his eyes fell slowly closed and had to suppress a groan at his own foolishness. How many years as a supposedly disciplined Sith Lord and he still couldn't' seem to rein in his tendency to act without thinking...no matter how much he'd needed it. Now they'd have to deal with the fallout.

"Master Xio," Siri said. "I must apologize for barging in like that. I...don't know what came over me."

The white-haired master turned a skeptical gaze on the younger girl. "Somehow, I doubt that."

She winced a little in response and glanced at Anakin who shook his head as if to say 'no use'. He couldn't think of anything that could get them out of this one. Kriff it.

"Hmm, yes. Perhaps now, an explanation we can have, yes?" Yoda said in a tone that brooked no argument. He gestured for Siri to have a seat.

She did so, hesitantly. Anakin, deciding that he really didn't want to be alone during this conversation quickly rose and occupied the cushion on the couch next to her. Master Xio took her own seat and an awkward silence fell over the room.

"Well?" Yoda prodded.

Siri looked away, obviously refusing to say anything. Anakin felt a surge of appreciation towards her. Even now she didn't want to break her oath.

Which, he suddenly realized with a cold dread, left this all to him.

Lovely.

Well, no sense in beating around the bush, so to speak. So he looked Yoda straight in the eyes.

"I have a confession to make. I did not come to you before because it sounds...ludicrous to say the least." Beside him, Siri snorted softly in agreement. It felt rather good to have someone backing him up again. "That being said, I no longer believe there is a way to avoid it and so I will come out and say it.

"Siri and I are from the future."

Chapter End Notes

AN: So, I recently posted some other stories and they're very different from this one. I appreciate readers going and looking them over, but a few of them commented saying I should just give up on those and go back to posting this one. There is NOTHING that will make me want to NOT post this one more than people doing that! I mean, come on! I know you like this story, I love your support, but this is a slow-paced fic for a reason, and I put a LOT of thought into it. Updates are not going to be fast. Sorry. I have a life. I have a job. I have a husband. This story doesn't come first. Honestly, if this hadn't already been mostly written, you probably wouldn't be getting it right now.

ALSO, I am PRACTICING ending stories. If you haven't noticed, I don't do endings very well and I want this one to end well, so I would really like constructive criticism on my other stories so I can learn. I already have almost the entire KH story written out and I want to know if it's a plausible ending. Working on tying up loose ends and whatnot.

If you WANT me to finish this or update faster, the best way is to send me a note with ideas for the future of the fic, thoughts on what has gone on so far, what you'd like to see, what you wouldn't like to see, etc. I get a few of those every now and then and they really, REALLY help my muses.

That being said, I do love reading your reviews. I really do love and appreciate all of your support.

Also, Thanks to Caradee, Khalthar and SPJaymo117 for helping me out with this chapter. Seriously, I don't know what I'd do without you guys...okay, I would, but it wouldn't be nearly as pretty. ^^;

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tai'k had initially counted the day's session as a decent success. She'd learned a great deal about Anakin and he'd given her even more to think about and analyze. She'd be spending quite a while going over how complicated of a past he must have to give off such a truthful vibe through the Force while showing different facades; his ability to manipulate and lead people around when he so desired; his reaction to adults in general and so many nuances she'd caught. Taik had been discussing her future plans for treatment with Yoda when everything suddenly and quite thoroughly crumbled.

She stopped talking the same instant he stiffened, both feeling the change in the Force. As one, she noted vaguely in the back of her mind, they looked to the seemingly innocuous door between them and the sudden storm that more or less exploded, quite suddenly, in the Force.

The mind healer found herself wishing she'd brought her lightsaber as she'd never felt anything like this before, and the abrupt unknown did not sit well with her. It wasn't the dark side. She'd had brushes with the dark side before—fallen Jedi and Jedi who were on the path to fall alike. No, while she could see this devolving to the darkness, currently it simply felt like an uncontrolled maelstrom of emotion. Disbelief, denial, anger, and sadness all rolled into a sort of righteous fury that pounded down around her, almost visible with it's power. What surprised her the most, though, was just how the Force responded and broadcasted these emotions...almost as if the *Force itself* felt them.

Then the door more or less flew open, far faster than if it had just moved on its own, and Anakin came striding out. For a moment, Tai'k didn't see a 10-year-old boy, but a full-grown man—one with longer hair and (oddly enough) a scar over his right eye. She blinked away the strangely specific image and did a double take as the blond boy strode into the room, face twisted in disbelief and rage as he focused on Master Yoda.

That wasn't just any expression of anger, but betrayal. Somehow, he'd been hurt. But how? And why did he seem to be taking it so personally?

She didn't know what to make of that.

He proceeded to stalk up to Master Yoda, more or less ignoring her.

"You!" he stated angrily. Tai'k managed to get over her shock and realized Anakin may not have the nicest of intentions towards the Grandmaster she'd known her entire life.

"Anakin?!" she asked loudly, hoping to get his attention. He didn't so much as acknowledge her in any way, shape or form. Instead he opened his mouth and continued to speak to the diminutive master. He'd raised his voice, but it wasn't really *loud* per se. He may as well have been screaming for the impact it had.

Yoda, ever stoic, met his fury with a serene, if disapproving gaze of his own and answered calmly. As Anakin continued to yell, she watched as the Grandmaster simply paid attention. Anakin accused him of...well, doing something (taking someone away?) with Kenobi (wasn't he Qui-gon Jinn's Padawan? The one who had *found* Anakin?). Right about then, she realized she'd missed something.

The feeling only worsened as the conversation continued.

She interrupted only once more, and when he flung her against the wall with what may very well have been either a warning to a threat (or both), she decided that the Grandmaster had this well handled. He certainly didn't give off any sort of distress as he told Anakin to explain, and fortunately the boy seemed more than willing to comply. Then, she did what she'd always done in emergencies and switched into objective analytical mode. She could go through her reaction to everything later. For now, she just needed to observe as much as she could.

Anakin mentioned two people after that, a boy and a girl, twins apparently, both of whom meant a great deal to him. Tai'k wondered if they happened to be siblings that Anakin was looking for, had perhaps even come to Coursacant to look for. She made a mental note to check the Temple records.

Then the boy accused Yoda (and the Jedi in general) of, well, playing god. Hypocritical gods, if she read the subtext correctly. In any other situation Tai'k would have risen in defense, but for now she simply noted it, knowing from the body language that it still wouldn't be the best idea to intervene at this point. She wondered why, if he felt that way about the Jedi, he'd consented to join the Order. She'd have to follow up with that as well.

She watched as the Grandmaster sat still through Anakin's tirade and then couldn't help but approve as he saw through the initiate's entire argument, turning it back on him calmly and gently with one simple question that wasn't really a question.

"Not speaking of another, are you."

From that point on, the whole conversation took a much more positive turn, she noted with approval, and Tai'k decided that she *had* to start taking notes. No matter how well trained, the human mind could only remember and observe so many things at once. It had taken a bit of finagling to get to her notepad, but she managed to bring it to her without disturbing the scene.

And then, somehow, something even more unexpected happened.

"Anakin Skywalker!"

The woman who strode through the door couldn't have been older than 24, if that. Senior Padawan then? Maybe a knight? She certainly held herself like a knight...like a very angry knight. No darkness from her, though. Despite her demeanor, she wore a healer's wing tunic and a long, outer robe...and nothing else.

The feeling that Tai'k missed something intensified again. She did *not* like it. Her own emotions were a distraction she couldn't afford at the moment, so she ignored the sensation in favor of finding out what was going on.

The newcomer didn't so much as glance her way, even after Tai'k inquired as to her identity. Instead, she could only watch as the woman walked up to the 10-year-old and proceeded to dress him down.

At first, he only stood there in shock. Then a troubled expression crossed his face and he asked:

"Did you know?"

The mind healer wanted to step in again, not wanting this to end up as an argument between the two of them (that could undo any progress they'd made) but Yoda stopped her with an outstretched hand. She disapproved, but she also deferred, closed her mouth and went back to taking her notes.

That was when things started to go from confusing to downright

impossible.

Anakin claimed he had a *daughter.* Princess Leia Organa. Tai'k blinked at the words she'd written.

And then, to her confusion, the girl responded...as if she'd *followed* his conversation and taken what he said as a simple truth. Tai'k couldn't chase away the frown that came to her lips.

From what the girl said, this 'Leia' was someone both of them knew...which made absolutely no sense at all because that implied that 'Leia' had grown at least somewhat, and even if Anakin had been subject to some kind of breeding program (she ignored how her stomach turned at the thought), then there was no physically possible way for the child to be older than a year. That wasn't even getting into the fact that he'd called her a Princess...of Alderaan (were there any princesses in Alderaan right now?) or that he said the girl been flaunted in front of him. He'd been born on Tatooine, right?

At this point, she'd stopped trying to make sense of things, just writing down what they said for future reference. Unfortunately, her brain didn't seem to want to stop analyzing everything; like how the woman then stated that she'd 'woken up here'. In the Temple? On Coruscant? Somehow, Tai'k didn't think so. So she just shook her head and continued to type because this had gone beyond anything she could have predicted. Part of her wondered if this were some sort of joke, because there was no way a kid could have grown children or the memories...of...an adult.

She froze for just a moment, the conversation falling to a muted background noise, because realization practically slapped her up-side the head. That was it. It had to be at least part of the puzzle. Anakin had always seemed so mature, because he *was.* Even though he stood before all of them in the body of a child, he had the mental capacity of an adult and the memories to go with it. She didn't know *how*, but...when one eliminates the impossible whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be it. He shouldn't have children or memories of planets he'd never been to, but he *did.* Even if he had the brain of a child physically, he'd somehow gained the mental capacity of someone much older.

Could it be the visions she and Girth had been discussing? She turned that thought around in her mind for a moment before discarding it. The way he spoke and the way it affected him suggested it ran far deeper (and far more real) than that. With that thought set aside, she

realized that she had no other explanation. She still missed pieces of the puzzle, important pieces, but she was certain of her deduction.

The overwhelmed feeling she'd been trying to address for days reared it's ugly head. 'Out of her depth' didn't really begin to touch on the situation. It wasn't because of a lack of skill or knowledge, but because this—because *Anakin* and everything about him—could easily be categorized as completely unprecedented.

Then, of course, it got worse.

"But...I tortured her, Siri."

In any other situation, she would have winced. The pain and guilt and horror she heard in his suddenly quiet voice signified a very large obstacle to an ideal state of his mental health. More notes went into the file as she listened.

The only positive thing she could find about this situation was that at least they were getting into territory she had some familiarity with. That, of course, didn't mean it would make for any easy treatment.

The woman, Siri apparently, seemed surprised and more than a little worried at his words. Exactly what about the statement surprised her, Tai'k couldn't say. The idea of someone torturing someone else (let alone a family member) was abhorrent, but was that what she'd reacted to? Or maybe the fact that Siri didn't know about this development previously? Seeing as she seemed to know so much more about Anakin and his (impossible) adult past than the rest of them. Exactly how well did they know each other?

Annoyance at the fact that she didn't have enough information struck again before she released it to the Force and returned to studying Anakin in the tense silence that followed his statement. The mind healer, herself, began to grow concerned with the downward spiral Anakin's thoughts seemed to be taking at the moment. Still, the fact that he could have such thoughts was a positive development. She could treat depression.

He went on to talk about plans for a 'Death Star' and how he'd tracked his (apparently adult) daughter, while not knowing her identity, and then tortured her for information on some sort of Rebel Base.

Somehow, impossibly, he'd managed to sound even more guilty than even just moments before. Yet another item on an already far-too-long list. For a while now, she'd gotten the impression he'd been trying to

stay afloat in the sea that was his life. Now she felt she'd begun to glimpse his truly heroic efforts. Later that day, she'd be marveling at the fact that he'd been able to hide this from her (and everyone else) while making as much progress as he had... Just who was Anakin Skywalker?

For a moment she wondered just how they'd get through it all. Then she dismissed the thought. They would. She'd make sure they would as long as Anakin was willing.

Siri, for all her anger and dramatic entrance before, seemed to grasp the delicacy of the situation because she knelt before him, eyes fixed intently on his face, even though his gaze seemed light-years away. She asked him to look at her.

Almost automatically, he did, slowly turning his wide eyes up to hers. It struck Tai'k that he did not look like a child right now, but more like an old man; old and tired and broken. Tai'k reclassified her previous assessment of PTSD. She decided to go straight to 'extreme PTSD', bypassing 'severe' altogether.

Siri's mouth set in a grim line. "Anakin, that isn't you anymore. You said so yourself." Her voice sounded so firm and sure that Tai'k knew she'd have to talk to this girl who knew so much. She made another note (without even looking because she couldn't take her eyes off of the scene—not wanting to miss anything) to do some research there and maybe set up time for another patient. (She had a feeling Siri would need it.)

He shook his head. "How can you say that?" he asked, his voice heavy and tired. "How? When I did—"

"No," Siri cut him off firmly. "Focus on me—on the here and now."

Non-analytical-Tai'k would have cheered if it wouldn't ruin the moment. Right now, though, Tai'k just leaned in. This was important...so important. She didn't need the Force to see that.

"I...can't," he muttered, his vision again so unfocused that she doubted he remembered where he was. "I was so happy when I found out about them—when I found out I was going to be a father. And then I... Why? Why did I let him manipulate me like that?"

Tai'k paused, pressed enter twice and made a new note (vaguely wondering how many pages of them she had right now). Someone had manipulated Anakin's adult self to an extreme extent if he'd ended up

torturing his children without even knowing. Judging from the way he'd practically spat the word 'him', there was more there too—fear, anger, betrayal...and she was pretty sure that would just be scratching the surface. The thought crossed her mind that she wasn't just going to have to rework everything, she'd have to approach from a completely different angle.

"I loved them so much," Anakin continued, "but they were better off without me in their lives, and that *kills* me."

She hadn't thought it possible to gain more guilt than he'd shown previously. She'd been wrong.

"Stop it!" Siri snapped, her hand snaking out and flicking him on the forehead. The physical stimuli caused Anakin to blink and his eyes cleared as he reached a hand up to rub at the spot where her finger had met his forehead. Tai'k decided right then and there that she approved of this girl. "Stop pulling an Obi-wan, all guilty and thinking you have to take the worlds on your shoulders and carry them all by yourself."

He didn't seem to know what to say to that for a moment because he hesitated before speaking up again, sounding entirely too bitter. "But isn't the Chosen One supposed to save the universe?"

Tai'k froze and her mind stopped working except for the two words echoing in her mind over and over again. 'Chosen One.'

Ages old prophesy.

Entire universe on the line.

She forced her brain to grind into motion again because if he was their 'Chosen One', and he had memories of an adult with extreme PTSD and the guilt of a war general who grew up with abuse and attachment and suddenly got thrown into the life of a Jedi...

Here she'd thought the stakes were high enough, but now she could practically feel the weight of her task suddenly doubled...tripled. For a moment, she seriously considered just walking away from the entire situation. Most of her realized just how difficult this was going to be and she'd be lying if she said she didn't have doubts about her ability to help him...but part of her understood that if she left now, it could potentially shatter Anakin—or at least what little faith he had in mind-healing Jedi. She couldn't do that to him. Not now.

Tai'k shook herself out of that thought process because she realized that Siri was speaking again. She'd said something about him balancing the Force, Tai'k thought.

"And besides, no one said you had to do it alone."

Tai'k blinked and looked again. Anakin, the 10-year-old sat in his chair, not Anakin the old-man, Anakin the dark-man, Anakin the adult, Anakin the manipulator, Anakin the initiate...Just Anakin the little boy.

It hit her again as to just how much she had her work cut out for her.

And she'd probably have to start looking at her own PTSD and shock after everything that had happened today once she was able to go through all of this without doing her best to cut herself off from her emotions for the sake of objectivity. Even now she wanted to retreat to figure out a battle strategy. One, she didn't doubt, she would have to build from scratch...

Siri's words seemed to reach Anakin because he looked up, and for the first time, Xio could see hope in those blue irises. She almost kicked herself for not noticing it's lack before. Probably would have if she hadn't been in analytical mode. Kriff, those masks of his were *good*.

He smiled and the knots in Tai'k's stomach that she hadn't even realized were there (and wouldn't have acknowledged if she had) relaxed a bit. "Thank you, Knight Tachi," he said genuinely. Gratitude practically radiated from him through the Force and that, more than anything else, put Xio's immediate worries to rest.

"Wait," the blond woman made a show of freezing in place. "Did you just...thank me?"

He snorted light-heartedly and brushed away her comment with a wave of his hand, and Anakin the adult sat in the chair. Tai'k did a double take at how easily she could see the changes now and wondered how she hadn't been able to see something so evident before.

"You were obviously just imagining things," Anakin scoffed in good humor. "Besides, did you honestly think you could waltz down here...in that—" he looked down at her in amusement— "without so much as a weapon to stop me?"

Siri didn't look down, but she did grab the robe and shoved it closed.

Tai'k wondered if she'd only just noticed how revealing her whole getup was.

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" Siri asked as she stood, hands still holding the robe closed. She then proceeded to look around, saw Yoda and Tai'k watching her and her face went scarlet.

Yup, only just realized.

"M-master Yoda! And Master..." she glanced over at Tai'k who simply raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Tai'k Xio," she responded, but moved her gaze back to Anakin wondering just what she could do with him now...what she would have to work on to help him regain (or gain, as the case may be) a healthy mental attitude. He noted her gaze and, before her eyes, his face paled again. Then he grimaced slightly.

"Master Xio," Siri said with a bow. "I must apologize for barging in like that. I...don't know what came over me."

Tai'k's one raised eyebrow inched higher. "Somehow, I doubt that."

The woman winced a little and glanced down at Anakin who shook his head as if to say 'no use'. Good. Maybe they'd finally get some answers here.

Thankfully, she wasn't the only one thinking that because Master Yoda spoke up.

"Hmm, yes. Perhaps now, an explanation we can have, yes?" He gestured for Siri to have a seat. To Tai'k's surprise, Anakin almost immediately got up and went to sit beside her. It was the first overtly obvious cry for support that she'd seen. She wasn't sure if that qualified as a positive or negative development.

After sitting in silence for several minutes, Master Yoda raised an eyebrow. "Well?" he asked.

Anakin and Siri exchanged glances. Then Anakin looked up. If Tai'k didn't know any better, she'd swear he was a seasoned knight with his professional posture and attitude. More than just an adult then.

Not for the first time, she wondered which Anakin was the *real* one.

"I have a confession to make," he said softly—resignedly. "I did not

come to you before because it sounds...ludicrous to say the least." Siri snorted derisively and in agreement if Tai'k had read things correctly. "That being said, I no longer believe there is a way to avoid it and so I will come out and say it.

"Siri and I are from the future."

With those words, Anakin Skywalker did the impossible: he shattered her state of calm objectivity. Tai'k's mind couldn't seem to process what he'd said so she just blinked at them, unable to really do anything else.

It took rather more effort than she would care to admit to force her mind to start working again, because...well, *time travel.* Whatever she'd been expecting, it wasn't that. She didn't know *what* to think about this, though. Sure, it fit with what they'd been discussing—explained all too much, really—but...it just wasn't possible. Time travel. Many had attempted it, as far as she knew, no one had succeeded.

Right?

And whether anyone else had or not, had Anakin and Siri? Or was he—were *they*—delusional? Either way.... Oh, Force. How was she supposed to even *start* to fix it? Yes, she really needed to find her center again. It wouldn't be an easy task.

Then Yoda spoke. "So you are."

Especially when *everyone in the room* seemed to enjoy dropping bombshells on her.

She turned (and she wasn't the only one, she noted with a touch of relief) to stare at him, wide eyed. He certainly didn't sound surprised. Tai'k was getting *really* tired of not knowing what to make of anything.

"You knew?" Anakin and Siri asked at the same time.

"Suspected for a while, Master Yaddle and I have. Unsure what to think, we were. Answer our questions you have, hmmm. But bring up more it does as well, so truth, it must be."

For a moment, Master Xio seriously considered bringing up Master Yoda's sanity before the Council. Then she realized exactly who she was thinking about and mentally stepped back to take a deep breath. Was this really such a terrible theoretical jump to take? A child with

adult memories came from the future. She'd already admitted to herself that it made sense. Just because it made sense didn't mean it was the *right* explanation though. Then again, that didn't make it untrue either.

The room fell into silence for a moment (something Tai'k was more than a little grateful for), giving her a chance to look at this all again. Yoda didn't sound senile, nor did he really give off any other indications that would normally tip her off. She hadn't noticed anything off about him at all. Really, the only thing that made her question him was the fact that she didn't know if what Anakin had suggested was possible. And why was she questioning? Because she'd never heard of a success? Because her mind and training told her it was impossible? But wasn't anything possible with the Force? Wasn't that what she'd always been taught too? Wasn't that what she believed?

Did she? Did she really?

If so, then why did she set limitations? The inconsistency made her stop and look harder. What *did* she believe? Did she believe in limitations, or in the enormity of the Force? Because she would have to choose one or the other. One was true, and one a perceived truth provided by fallible, sentient minds to help them comprehend.

She didn't know how long she'd studied that thought, but she did note that the others had started to talk again. She tuned them out, sensing that her decision right now was vital somehow, in more ways than one.

If she believed anything was possible through the Force, then their story was plausible. If not...then where did that leave her? What did she believe? And whether she believed it or not, what was true? Because she'd come to the knowledge a long time ago that truth is not relative, only the feeble definitions of sentients were.

So which was true?

Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to believe that the Force had limitations. It just didn't...feel right. It didn't make sense to her mind either, now that she thought about it. She wanted everything to have a limitation because it was easier to consider (and comprehend), but easier did not mean better or more correct.

So she had to believe that their story was plausible and had to treat it as such.

Her mind reeled (hence why she hadn't wanted it to be, because the implications...mind boggling didn't *begin* to touch on it). She felt that for the first time her eyes were opened to the sheer possibilities the Force provided. She wasn't stupid, but it had just never occurred to her before...

"Anakin," Siri said quietly, somehow disrupting her thoughts, "are you going to tell them *everything*?"

He seemed to pale and she distinctly noticed him swallowing before he looked at the floor in front of him. He didn't answer.

His lack of response managed to bring the rest of Tai'k's mind back to reality. Alright, for now at least, she'd believe them and treat them accordingly. With that settled, she turned back to her notepad and began to make notes again, fingers flying so quickly over the keys they were almost a blur. She felt herself begin to grow steady and objective again. Good.

Yoda seemed to wither just a little bit in the heaviness that seemed to follow Siri's question. "Trust us, you should. Believe you, we will."

"Even if I have no proof?" Anakin whispered. "Even if what I tell you will make you question anything I've ever said to you?"

Tai'k shook her head, already mostly recovered from her epiphany. "We will have to at least consider whatever you say," she said as kindly as she could. "We will do our best to discern the truth."

He didn't trust them. She could see that in the way his brow furrowed and his eyes tightened. He did nothing to hide the frown on his face from them, and in all honesty, she took that as a good sign. He didn't trust them, but he wanted to. Maybe that would be enough. If not, well, *that* was a good place to start.

Anakin glanced at Siri, who seemed to be at a loss as well because she shrugged only slightly, as if to say 'your choice, remember?' The boy's frown deepened.

"I need your word that you will not tell anyone else what I say," he tried. Tai'k considered the responses she could give to that, but ultimately decided to yield to Yoda. Unfortunately for all of them, he just sat there, leaning on his gimmer stick and staring at the ground as if he didn't really see it.

Finally, he looked up, large eyes sadly meeting Anakin's. "Promise this

we cannot. If vital information, this is, then share it, we must."

The lines between Anakin's eyebrows (somehow, impossibly) darkened, but Tai'k agreed with Yoda wholeheartedly, even if she hoped it wouldn't come to be a sore point between them. She wanted to be honest with Anakin, but she also wanted him to *confide* in her. In them. She'd already told him they wouldn't tell the Council anything he didn't want them to and she wanted to remind him of that, but she also didn't want to interrupt, sensing that it might not be wise. Before anyone could say anything, though, Yoda continued.

"Promise you, we can, that act without telling you, we will not."

Tai'k blinked in surprise at his words and didn't bother hiding it. Master Yoda was making a concession? Why would he—the Grandmaster of the Jedi Temple—give such an allowance? Then again, for future knowledge... It could be vitally important, for an unfathomable number of sentients. Part of her wanted to jump at this opportunity as well, but she also didn't want Anakin to feel that they only valued him for any knowledge he may have.

Anakin, for his part, studied the pair of them intently, as if scrutinizing their very souls. It would have been disconcerting to see such an expression on such a young face at any other time, but Tai'k refused to let her professionalism drop again. Analytical and objective, she reminded herself and felt herself begin to slip back into the stillness that allowed her to remove her bias from the picture.

Anakin, for his part, must have found what he was looking for because after a minute he sighed and nodded, expression grave.

"Very well. But I warn you. If you act too soon or too late with this information, it will spell the end of the Jedi Order and the Galaxy as we know it."

"You mean, from a certain point of view?" the young woman beside him asked quietly. Judging from the wry quirk of her lips it was meant half as a bitter statement, half as joke or to at least lighten the mood. It didn't work. Anakin just turned and stared up at her with a dark expression that said 'really?'

Her smile faded and she looked away, nodding in concession and apology.

"What do you mean?" Tai'k heard herself ask warily, bracing herself for more insanity.

Anakin fixed that intense gaze on her. "The Sith ruling the known galaxy."

Her bracing failed. Epically.

"What?" she gasped. "But how? I mean..." She glanced over at Yoda, only to see grim acceptance. Her mind whirled. How could that happen? There were only two Sith, right? And hadn't they been killed? Yes, she'd heard of the Sith that had killed Qui-gon (who in the Temple hadn't?) but still, it hadn't seemed *real* then (she definitely needed to address her own apparent passiveness). And besides, how could one man, even if he was a Sith, destroy the Order?

Siri snorted softly. "Aren't we a little late for that?"

Tai'k's forehead furrowed and whatever remained of her shield of calm seemed to creak ominously in her mind. What had Siri meant by that?

"Point," Anakin returned, raising his eyebrows and implying he'd forgotten about a little detail.

The butterflies of worry in Tai'k's stomach turned into carbonite marbles jarring around. She did *not* like the sound of that, even if she couldn't begin to fathom what the two of them meant. Surely the Jedi wouldn't have overlooked a Sith taking over the universe...

Right?

"Few positions hold such power. Implying, you are, that a Sith, the Chancellor is," Yoda whispered.

Tai'k's breath caught in her throat and her heart skipped several beats. The remnants of her calm shattered utterly.

"*What*?" she practically hissed, unable to do more than get the breathy word out. She could tell that Yoda wanted to be wrong. Desperately. She agreed with him because if she kept getting news like this, here eyeballs may very well just fall out of her head, or get stuck in permanent 'widened' state. And all of this shock could not be good on her heart. She wasn't exactly young.

Anakin snorted. "I only implied because I had yet to come out and directly say it. Chancellor Palpatine is a Sith Master known as Darth Sidious."

Both of the masters in the room sat in silence. Tai'k just tried to get

their head around that...around the damage that could do. Although, Tai'k had seen the chancellor in person. He had always seemed so open and welcoming and she agreed with many of his policies as well.

But then, isn't that what a Sith would want them to think?

She'd have to keep an eye on her own paranoia along with the potential PTSD after this, because if that were true, *anyone* could technically be a Sith. Although the chances of that were extremely slim, the possibility was still there. What a terrifying thought.

"How do you know this?" she asked, not liking how quiet and weak her voice sounded.

Anakin closed his eyes. Obviously he'd hoped she wouldn't ask that question. Next to him, Siri put a comforting hand on his shoulder. It still took him several seconds to compose himself. "I know because I used to be his apprentice. In the future, I was a Sith Lord named Darth Vader."

Chapter End Notes

> I would like to thank everyone who sent ideas to me for the story. They're the reason why the chapter got done when it did. That and Carradee from A03 and Khalthar who have been poking me into writing by sending thoughts and ideas or just lending a listening ear and then beta reading (haven't gotten it back from Khalthar yet, so it might change slightly, fyi).

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin pretty much assumed his time as a Jedi had come to an end and was already making contingency plans because it was easier than thinking about just how royally he'd screwed up. He couldn't read Yoda's reaction at all. The Grandmaster just seemed to be staring thoughtfully at the ground, but somehow Anakin didn't think that boded well for him. And Master Xio...he thought he may have broken her. She had a sort of distant look in her eye that practically screamed 'information overload!'

He looked away from them, staring hard at the dark brown material covering the arm of the couch beside him considering his next move.

Then Master Xio took a deep, shuddering breath. "Are you ki-...I just...a *Sith* Lord?"

Anakin got the distinct impression that she'd had to pause to keep her language professional. He still flinched. There had always been a possibility (probability) of her not accepting this...accepting him. Really, he was lucky she'd lasted as long as she had...and kind of surprised that he wished she would accept him. Thinking back to their first session all those weeks ago (had it really only been weeks? It felt like years), this development bordered on miraculous.

She went on, unhindered. "I just...*how* has this been *working* at all?! I've been treating you for PTSD on top of a slave mentality and really I should have been treating you as recovering from a guilt complex and sociopathy! I mean the implications..." She rose from her chair and began to pace, muttering under her breath.

Anakin, for his part, just stared at her. That...hadn't been what he'd expected from her. Firstly, sociopath? He'd never been big on definitions, but he'd always classified himself (well, Vader) as a psychopath*. What was the difference, and could someone recover from either state? He hadn't thought so...but then, he also hadn't thought anyone could come back from the dark side too.

Secondly, how was it that she hadn't run away in abject terror and revulsion? She hadn't even tried to make a 'tactical retreat', which he'd

fully been expecting her to do even in the best case scenario. He'd definitely overloaded her ability to cope (something he was sure that the Anakin of the past would have taken a sort of twisted satisfaction from—overloading someone who had trained their whole life to handle things like this), but that would only make her reaction more honest, wouldn't it? So really, why was she *still* talking about treating him—a Sith Lord and the destroyer of the Jedi Order and, as she'd already stated, a sociopath (psychopath)? She should be petitioning for him to be thrown into some brig in the bowels of the Temple, never to see the light of day again. Perhaps she just hadn't made the connection yet?

He'd missed something, he was sure, because her reaction truly was too good to be true.

He glanced around the room to see if anyone else was hearing this. To his relief, Siri looked just as shocked as he did. Yoda seemed as unflappable as ever, but then, it was *Yoda.*

"You're...not afraid of me?" he asked hesitantly, searching her eyes for the fear or hatred he expected to see.

The older woman glanced over at him as if suddenly realizing she was still in a room with other people. Then she took a deep breath and regained her composure for the most part. Again, Anakin got the feeling that this was not a side of Master Xio most people saw. After a moment, she looked him straight in the eye and spoke with a rock-solid voice.

"I know very little about the Sith, Anakin, and the unknown is always fear-inducing. However, I am a Jedi Master, and I intend to see this through to the end. I have since I agreed to take you on. If that means I have to treat a recovering Sith, then I will happily do so. And...I have to apologize for my outburst. Apparently even my mind, with what years of experience and training I have, can only take so much."

Anakin's stare became incredulous. She'd stated that with what he could only describe as firm determination and he felt nothing that would suggest otherwise through the Force. It didn't make sense to him. She wasn't backing away or making excuses or running out the door...well, maybe she would once he told her what he'd done...

He stiffened, realizing what he'd just thought.

He planned on telling her. He'd be lying to himself if he said that didn't fill him with dread, but...somehow, she and Girth both had

reached places of trust in his mind. This fell under the category of 'unheard of' because Girth wasn't even Force Sensitive, hadn't been someone he'd met in his previous life at all, and was a mind healer (a class of profession he instinctively distrusted). Xio, however, seemed even more incredulous because while he didn't remember ever meeting her either, she was still a *Jedi Master* and also a mind healer.

Anakin thought back. Just how had all this come to be again?

"Recovering sociopath?" Siri spoke beside him, sounding rather confused herself. "Can sociopaths recover?"

Master Xio studied the two of them for several seconds before nodding. "Yes. It's not exactly common, but it can happen and Anakin has already made steps to do so."

"I...always categorized myself as a psychopath," he said finally, deciding to test the waters and make sure that his sudden (and unexpected) trust had been well placed.

He couldn't read the look she shot him. Somewhere between fear and sadness and pity and a sort of resignation perhaps? He was still trying to decide when she spoke.

"You can empathize with people and you feel guilt for your actions. Psychopaths rarely do that. They're actually born with a physical disability affecting their brains. Psychopaths can be taught to have a healthy lifestyle and can be productive members of society, but tend to be more dangerous than sociopaths as a general rule because often people can't see the danger they represent until it's too late. Sociopaths can have those traits, but more often tend to be more obvious in their destructive traits. Also their behaviors often result from trauma or are learned from a psychopath or sociopath in their life. However, sociopaths still have the *physical ability* to feel and empathize. Therefore you cannot be a psychopath.

"Also, with the honesty you've portrayed, I can't even say you represent a true sociopath anymore."

Anakin just stared at her as his mind processed that.

"Oh." He finally said, because really, what else could he say to that? She'd been scarily accurate once more. And just where had he first heard about psychopaths? Somehow he suspected Palpatine...again.

The former Sith thought over her words again, and something else

occurred to him. "According to your definitions, Sidious is a Psychopath. I highly doubt he has the physical ability to feel sympathy or empathy...but he is an incredible actor. I...don't know anyone who could see through his facade when he presented it."

From the grim expression on her face, she'd expected that.

"Wait, are you saying that the dark side simply turns someone into a sociopath or psychopath?" Siri asked.

Master Xio shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I would have to say that the tendencies are already there to begin with. I theorize that the dark side simply intensifies these traits while subduing anything positive." She paused for a moment, looking contemplative. "I suppose that it would draw anyone born with psychopathic or even sociopathic tendencies, which all sentients portray at some point in their lives. Hmm, I'll have to do more research."

Anakin felt his expression cool somewhat.

"Are you claiming that use of the dark side skews perspective and thus absolves the user of guilt?"

Xio blinked and seemed taken aback. She frowned at him, as if something didn't make sense, before continuing.

"No. Under the influence of the dark side or not, you can still make decisions and you know what is right or wrong, correct?"

Anakin nodded slowly. "Yes. Your perception is skewed under its influence, to say the least, but I still knew that much of what I did was morally wrong. I simply...didn't care. Or, at least I convinced myself I didn't." And he was paying for that now.

The white-haired woman nodded. "At that point it may be more difficult to make a correct decision, but, as you've stated, it is still possible. Any decisions made by a sentient, whether under the influence of the dark side or another force, unless it is physically or mentally impossible for them to do otherwise, should be held responsible for their actions."

She finished speaking and a strange silence fell between them. Anakin, for his part, felt himself relax somewhat. He wouldn't have bothered continuing if she would have simply tried to absolve him of any guilt. Because if he wasn't guilty, than Palpatine wasn't guilty, and he couldn't accept that. Palpatine knew exactly what he'd been doing,

even now he knew what was going on, dark side or not. He knew his actions would hurt others, he just didn't care. Or really, he *liked* to see people struggling and hurting and in pain and broken...as abhorrent as Anakin found that. Vader had gone out of his way to hurt people, but usually as a release, not as some sort of perverse pleasure. It still wasn't *right* but at least he'd never gotten to a point where he *enjoyed* others' suffering. He could use it, channel it, manipulate it if need be, but outright like it? No.

As Vader, that had been a failing. As Anakin, he found it to be a small redemption. He clung to it because he didn't find redemption in himself often.

Finally, Xio glanced at the chrono. They'd gone far over their allotted time, Anakin noticed as he followed her gaze.

"Well," she said, "I think we all need a break here. You," she said, looking Siri up and down, "should probably be getting back to the healer's wing before they start a temple-wide search." They hadn't told her anything about the Padawan/Knight, but it wouldn't be difficult to make a correct guess as to why she'd shown up in that attire.

"You," the mind healer turned to Anakin, "have homework to do. I suggest you do it and get to bed early tonight."

The former adult blinked at her, part of him chaffing at the fact that she knew his real age and was still treating him like a child. But then her expression softened and she explained.

"The normalcy of the schedule you've had will help to keep you grounded in the here and now. From what I've seen, you'll need that, so please make an attempt at least." He still wasn't too happy about it, but he supposed he could see the sense in her words.

She went on. "I'll be with you when you meet Healer Girth next time. Come half-an-hour early and we can discuss what you're comfortable speaking to him about. Until then, if you have any problems between now and then, please come and see me. You can reach me in the healer's wing at any time. I'll also give you my personal comm frequency so you can call me if you need to."

With that, she handed Anakin a piece of flimsy with her comm signal frequency on it.

"I do mean any time," she said. "Day or night. Five minutes after our sessions or five minutes before, or in the middle of the week. In the

middle of the night, even. Just make sure to give me the time I need to become coherent. But I want you to promise to call me."

Anakin blinked at her and then looked down at the paper, and then up at her again. "For what?"

She shrugged. "Whenever the fancy strikes you. Whenever you want to talk about something. If a problem occurs. If you notice that you're having a hard time separating the past from the present or if you need someone to ground you in the present. If you have a nightmare that unsettles you...for whatever reason, no matter how small. You need to get used to talking about things and not hiding them."

This time Anakin couldn't help his brow furrowing as he looked at the number. "I'm...not sure I can promise you I'll do that."

She deflated a little when he glanced back up at her. "Can you promise me you'll try?"

Anakin stared at her for a few moments, then shot a look at Yoda (who said nothing, and here Anakin had been expecting another lecture). When it seemed obvious the old Master wasn't going to comment, he turned his gaze back on the number in his young, rough hands.

"Very well."

"Good," the relief in her voice was palpable. He looked back up at her again, trying not to feel sheepish. Blast this childish brain of his. If she noticed his unease, she didn't say, although she did go on. "And thank you for being honest. Now, off with you both."

"Yes, Master Xio," Siri and Anakin said in unison as they rose, bowed to her and then to Master Yoda.

"Let me escort you to the healer's wing," Anakin said as they walked outside, leaving the two masters alone to talk over everything. The fact that he was walking out of there of his own volition (not in binders and headed for the detention cells) was, he realized, a minor miracle. He paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and reveled in his freedom. He hadn't felt this...light in...well, since he'd first been brought to the Temple. Like bonds that had held him down for years were suddenly gone.

He could get used to this feeling.

Anakin and Siri walked to the healer's wing in silence. Just before the door, she paused and turned to him, sensing that he wanted to say something.

He smiled softly up at her. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?" she asked, confused.

"For coming to rescue me."

She blinked at him for several seconds before a smile came to her own lips. "Thank you," she replied.

It was Anakin's turn to be confused.

"Why thank me?"

"For not going back on your word and for coming back again."

They stared at each other, and it felt far more like a mutual friendship than it had since before they'd come back.

"You're welcome," he replied.

"So're you," she said with a wink and he watched her stride back into the healer's wing.

xXx

Tai'k and Yoda sat in silence for several minutes after Anakin and Siri left.

Finally Tai'k opened her mouth. "Master," she said softly, "I believe them."

Yoda nodded solemnly. "Unprecedented, this is."

Tai'k, for the first time in probably decades, snorted derisively. "Forgive me, Master, but that has to be the largest understatement of all time."

To her surprise, Yoda smiled at her. "Handled that well, you did."

She sighed and shook her head. "Not there at the end."

"Too hard on yourself, you are."

A small smile made its way onto her lips. "Perhaps. But what about you? Do you really believe them?"

"Sensed only earnestness from them, I did."

She hummed and nodded.

Then she swallowed and had to steady her nerves before she spoke again. "Master...this could change everything."

Yoda raised his head to look at her with that piercing stare of his. "Change everything, you say? Or change us? Truth will be, no matter what we believe."

That mirrored her own sentiment so closely she couldn't help but relax just a little, even if this still seemed like too much to take in all at once.

"It may change the Order," she pointed out. Yoda just put his chin on top of his hands and didn't say anything. His silence was telling enough.

"Do you...think we can really help them?" she asked him, her voice falling to barely above a whisper.

Yoda cocked his head at her. "Do you?"

The smile returned, even if it seemed a bit more sardonic. "Yes," she replied.

He nodded, seeming pleased. "Then no doubt do I have."

"You place too much trust in me, I think."

"Until more trust you can place in yourself, then rely on my trust you may."

The smile blossomed into a full-blown grin.

"You amaze me, Master."

He chuckled to himself, a sort of humming laugh she hadn't heard from him since she was a youngling. "Amazing, am I?" He glanced over at the door. "Amazed by those around me I am, every day. After all these years, even."

Tai'k followed his gaze and couldn't help but agree.

xXx

Coira tried to hide her worry. She really did. She knew it was stupid and pathetic, and she *really* tried not to think about her friend, but that little bout of protectiveness for her fellow classmate (Sith Lord, Jedi Knight, Father, Murderer, Savior, Chosen One, confusion personified) just wouldn't go away. Probably because she knew what had happened to him before (what would—could—happen again). She knew it was overwhelming and that she really hadn't grasped it all yet —wasn't sure she *could*—but that only seemed to make her want to help Anakin more. Preferably *without* getting in his way.

The fact that he'd *accepted* her in all her strangeness—encouraged her even—probably had a lot to do with why she felt this way. She'd always thought (hoped) that if she were taken as a Padawan that her Master would be able to accept and understand her in a way her classmates just couldn't seem to. She wasn't sure what it said about her when she realized the only person to really accept her was a time-traveling former Sith Lord.

The click of a tray being set down beside hers brought her out of her thoughts and she glanced up to see Maelee sitting down next to her gracefully. Coira ignored the twinge of jealousy she almost always felt when looking at the other girl. Maelee was a perfect example of everything Coira wasn't: Thoughtful instead of brash; lovely instead of plain; dark hair and eyes to Coira's lighter, more drab appearance; a study of control to Coira's difficult-to-restrain emotions; graceful instead of awkward. Maelee was, in all actuality, the perfect Jedi Initiate.

Maelee had everything, looks, brains and a future, and everyone knew it. She also tended to avoid Coira most of the time, probably because she didn't know how to deal with her. Which begged the question, why was she sitting down with her like this? Coira glanced down the table, but the others seemed to be caught up in their own conversations. Hik'te was talking rather excitedly with Tru Veld and didn't seem to have noticed that his best friend had moved.

"I've given quite a lot of consideration to the question postured by Thoran," Maelee said. That was something else about her, she didn't *speak* like a ten-year-old. Maybe that's what Anakin liked about her? Why he befriended her too? Then again, Maelee had always been Hik'te's friend and they tended to be a package deal. Anakin and Hik-te seemed like pretty good friends to Coira.

Either way, Coira found herself blinking out of a stupor and nodding slowly. "And?"

The dark-haired girl seemed to look thoughtfully at her for a moment. A curtain of dark hair moving in a way that reflected lovely ribbons of shimmering light. The jealousy pinged again, but Coira ignored it in anticipation of the girl's next comment.

"I believe I was too hasty in my previous assessment. I believe you are right and that Anakin hails from the future."

Coira felt her eyes widen and her mouth drop open.

Oh, Force.

The answer must have been written all over her face (hardly surprising after a shock like that, but still) because Maelee raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"You asked him already? Surprising. Good for you."

Coira sputtered. "W-what's that supposed to mean?"

Maelee just shrugged nonchalantly, like she hadn't just uncovered one of the largest secrets to come to the Jedi Temple in who knew how long. "With my previous assessment of your self-esteem and your own uncertainty about the theory, I hadn't thought you'd voice it to him."

"My self esteem's just fine," Coira said, bristling.

The dark-haired girl brushed her hand through the air dismissively. "I meant no offense by it. I still think it's a positive development."

Coira didn't really know what to make of this. She watched Maelee eat for several seconds before she turned back to her own tray, wondering what she should do now. It took her a few minutes to realize that she wasn't going to eat anything else herself, so she waited until Maelee was done and followed her to the tray deposit.

Then she grabbed Maelee's hand.

"Come on," she said.

Maelee tried to yank her hand away, but Coira wouldn't let go.

"What are you doing?" the dark-haired girl asked angrily.

"To talk to Anakin."

"That can wait. I need to study for—"

"No," Coira cut her off. Normally she'd be all for letting things go and allowing the studious girl do whatever she needed to do, but with what Anakin had said and the Sith that could be Chancellor one day and...no, they needed to talk to Anakin. "We need to go. Now."

The other girl seemed surprised at Coira's insistence, and only put up a mild resistance as the light-haired girl led her down the hall wondering how they'd be able to fix this.

xXx

Anakin felt like he'd been emotionally run over by a herd of bantha. Tired didn't describe it. But he also felt...better somehow that went beyond the lessened burden on his soul. He still hurt, but in a way that suggested healing and growth. It was more subtle than the lightness he'd felt earlier, but it was still there once he examined himself, and he found he still liked how he felt right now. He hoped he still would in the morning too, when he didn't feel so bone-weary.

After escorting Siri back into the healer's wing (without going in himself, he wasn't stupid enough to try and face down an angry Bant with Siri there, thank you very much) he'd decided to head for the cafeteria. Too much had happened today and it felt more like months had passed instead of hours.

Still, he figured he could grab something to eat, make an attempt at his homework as Master Xio had suggested, and head to bed. Part of him wondered if he should just skip everything else and go straight to bed, but something told him he needed to visit the cafeteria for whatever reason, and he was hungry anyway. So he followed the intuition.

Just as he turned the corner just outside his destination, he ran into Maelee and Coira, which was a rather strange occurrence as he'd been under the impression that the two girls weren't that close.

The first words out of Coira's mouth didn't reassure him.

"Anakin! There you are! I didn't tell her *anything,* I promise!"

His already frazzled and over-worked nerves twinged and he felt his eye twitch a bit. He may have to get that looked at.

"What?" he asked slowly.

Maelee, for her part, turned her head to Coira with a raised eyebrow. "It seems my calculations were off," she muttered. Really, she was such an analytical person. Anakin usually found it amusing and sometimes refreshing to speak with her. Now was not one of those times.

"Didn't tell her what?" he asked again.

"That you're from the future," Maelee said.

Anakin stared at her for several seconds before putting a hand up to the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, Force."

xXx

Tai'k was surprised her comm went off just as she turned it back on. She was even more surprised (and very pleased) that she recognized the signal for being one of those given to the initiates. It had to be Anakin.

"Hello?" she answered.

Anakin's calm but tense voice answered back. "Master Xio...a situation has risen. I'm coming back with two peers. Please have Master Yoda there as well."

She turned to call out to the aging Master only to find him calmly watching her from the doorway, as if he knew exactly what had just transpired. Sometimes she wondered just how precognitive the Grandmaster was.

"He's here," she replied, lifting an inquisitive eyebrow in Yoda's direction.

"Good. Because my peers...have discovered my secret."

She didn't know what to say to that, so she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Which one?" she asked, because he had many.

His silence did nothing to reassure her.

"Oh, Force," she muttered.

"It appears that everyone agrees with your sentiment," Anakin replied

dryly.

xXx

Their little post session with the two girls who had somehow figured out Anakin's secret did a lot to reassure Tai'k while simultaneously giving her more to worry about. From the hints dropped there, Maelee and Coira had both figured out Anakin was from the future (what intelligent girls). From the exchanged looks Coira and Anakin shared, she knew more. Just how much more, Tai'k couldn't say, but she suspected it was quite a bit.

Master Yoda swore the girls to secrecy, reiterated how important this was to not talk to anyone else about, or even think it around other Jedi (as sometimes they could pick up on thoughts) and then commended them for their insight.

They both left preening, although Coira seemed a little more uneasy in hers. They were sent off before Anakin so Tai'k could speak with him once they were alone again:

"How much does Coira know?"

Anakin swallowed. "More or less everything, minus a few details," he muttered.

Tai'k put a hand to her nose. "Why?" she asked.

"When she confronted me it...slipped out." He didn't look like he was too pleased with his answer.

The mind-healer repressed a sigh. "Anakin, I'm glad you trusted someone enough to tell them. It shows remarkable improvement. I just have to wonder at the wisdom of telling a child."

"One who, in the Ambassador program, is," Yoda added grimly.

Anakin's mouth thinned. "I know. I...realized that about half way through telling her." He looked up at them. "We have to get her out of the program. We can't just have her back out, he'd find it suspicious and he'd look for a reason to seek her out. I've thought a lot about it and the only way it would be plausible and not suspicious is to make it physically impossible for her to go into the program."

He looked practically sick when he said that.

"You haven't told her about this, have you," Tai'k asked quietly.

Anakin's eyes studied the carpet in front of them. "No."

"Suggesting a sickness, you are," Yoda said thoughtfully, although he didn't seem altogether approving either.

The former Sith looked up at him sadly. "I can't see any other way. If she's around him and he finds out... I know I'll have to face him eventually. I know he's...I know. But if he finds out who I used to be, he'll find a way to turn me back or use me against the Jedi—the universe. I know he will. I just...I can't."

"Hmm, perhaps less reckless you should be in the future, hmm?" Yoda said sternly.

Anakin took a deep breath before answering and Tai'k got the distinct impression he was releasing something to the Force. Then he fixed Yoda with a stare the mind-healer couldn't read. "I've always been reckless. I am less so now than I was but I'm not sure it is a trait that I can purge because I have tried."

That struck a chord in Tai'ks mind. She'd have to do some research.

"So, let me get this straight," she said, pulling them back on topic. "You want to fake a sickness—an outbreak—in the Temple so that you can prevent Coira from this program so the Sith will never see her."

Anakin's mouth thinned as he shook his head. "No. He'll see through it if it's fake."

Her eyes widened. "You want to start a *real* epidemic?"

He cringed but nodded his head.

"Anakin, that's too dangerous! Even if we don't introduce anything deadly, it could mutate! What if one of the young crechlings contracted it? Because if it's serious enough to have someone back out from a year-long program than it could be deadly to them!"

"I know," he muttered, "but it's all I could think of. He'll be suspicious of anything else. He'll probably be suspicious of this but if he gets the information Coira has, it could spell the end of the Galaxy as we know it and the Jedi Order." His fists clenched as he looked up at her. "I won't be the fall of the Jedi again."

Tai'k couldn't help but stare at him, half in horror, half in pride, and half in pure shock...and she knew she'd end up having to do the math to that one later.

"Hmm, meditate on this, we will," Yoda said finally, drawing Tai'k's attention. He shot her a pointed look and she nodded. Right. Meditate on this.

Oh, Force.

"For now, to bed we should go, hmm?"

"Yes," Tai'k said finally, if a bit distractedly. She'd have to just push all of this to the side for now and pick it up tomorrow. Fortunately, she was good at doing that, especially when particularly overwhelmed. She didn't think she'd ever been as overcome as she felt now.

"Thank you, Masters," Anakin said softly but sincerely as he bowed to them and left for the second time that night.

"Good night, Master Xio," Yoda said as he too hobbled out of the room.

"Night," Tai'k heard herself mutter. Then she looked at all of her things, gathered them and headed for her room and a night of reading something completely and utterly inane. Best way to get her mind off of current problems. And right now, she needed that...badly.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks SO much to my beta readers, Carradee, Khalthar and SPJaymo117!

*Anakin is a victim here. Unfortunately, victims often turn into perpetrators themselves, as Anakin did. In this case, though, Anakin thought he was a psychopath because Palpatine somehow planted that in him and nurtured it; manipulated him very subtly into thinking he was just like Palpatine, or at least that he was *supposed*to be.

Psychopath vs Sociopath synopsis

It was brought to my attention (thank you J, you rock!) that not everyone has done research on psychopaths and sociopaths and thus there are a lot of misconceptions about them. Here are a few:

Myth: All psychopaths are obviously or overtly violent.

Fact: It's not unusual for psychopaths to be violent, but it isn't a defining factor. Psychopaths lack empathy—actually have a physical inhibition that won't allow them to do so. They still know right from wrong, they still know good from evil (and what hurts others), they don't necessarily have a break with reality (see below), but they basically don't/can't care about anyone else. This isn't an excuse if they still hurt and manipulate others, often for their own kicks, but while all psychopaths are dangerous, not all of them are violent and not all of them are a detriment to society.

www.sociopathworld.com/2014/03/james-fallons-life-as-nonviolent.html

Myth: Psychopath and sociopath are the same thing.

Fact: While both stem from Antisocial Personality Disorder, there are differences. In most cases, psychopaths are naturally predisposed to not care about others (born) while Sociopaths are taught to not care about others (made). Both can be (and most often are) emotionally and psychologically abusive (toxic) to others. Psychopaths tend to be more dangerous because they manipulate without remorse and will plan for years to get something to come to fruition. Sociopaths more often tend to be less organized, more impulsive and violent. Sociopaths can have psychopathic tendencies and visa versa, but there is a difference.

www.diffen.com/difference/Psychopath_vs_Sociopath

Myth: Psychopaths all hurt animals and others.

Fact: Many do act out in that way, but not all. The worst ones tend to be those who actually emotionally and mentally abuse others because it's harder to prove and thus can go on for *years*. Not every psychopath hurts those around them intentionally (some can and do use their unique outlook for the good of others), but it is a common trait.

psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/02/12/differences-between-a-psychopath-vs-sociopath/

Myth: Psychopaths are psychotic.

Fact: Psychotic people have uncontrolled breaks from reality and often can't function because of it (Schizophrenia). Psychopathic

people CAN be psychotic (just like anyone can be), but the more dangerous ones aren't. (see above)

Myth: All psychopaths are intelligent.

Fact: Psychopaths and Sociopaths can be intelligent, but there's a spectrum in both the intelligence category and the severity of psychopathy/sociopathy. The lower the intelligence, the easier it is to deal with the person as a general rule (but they're still very dangerous). (See above)

Myth: All people think they're good or like to think well of themselves. Even bad guys.

Fact: While I wish this were true, it really isn't. *Most* people like to think highly of themselves and often people trick themselves into thinking they're doing the right thing, even when they know they're not (Vader). Psychopaths quite literally don't care, but they can use the fact that others do to their advantage, both to manipulate and to encourage others to assume the best of their intentions. On the other end of the scale, the whole idea that there is no good and evil, only power, is a tactic used by psychopaths to control others and sociopaths often adopt this as their motto in an attempt to absolve guilt.

www.twitlonger.com/show/dh5l3q?share

Conclusion: Palpatine is a textbook psychopath. Anakin has Borderline Personality and Vader is a sociopath. Even that could be argued due to his slave mentality. There's also an argument that BPD = untreated complex PTSD (which totally applies here). Note: A person only needs to be diagnosed with 5 of the 10 symptoms (simultaneously and/or continually) to be considered Borderline Personality. Anakin has 7.

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/borderline-personality-disorder/index.shtml

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Count Dooku found himself in a place he never thought he would be—indecision. It wasn't that he was mentally *incapable* of making a decision, per se, but the fact that he just couldn't seem to bring himself to actually choose. He knew who the Sith Lord was, so he had two options: he could go to the Jedi and turn Sidious in, or he could sit on the information.

The fact that he'd even considered the second option made him reevaluate himself. He knew what a Sith could do. Even before he'd spoken with Lars, he knew what the Jedi taught, and honestly it had merely been a very watered-down version of what Lars spoke of. He knew the darkness brought misery and anguish... but he'd also known of nothing else that could keep the light in check. He knew light and darkness had to both exist at some point, because without darkness how could one know or choose light?

And yet, the other Jedi couldn't see that. They seemed completely content to believe that balance meant light only and that they could happily eradicate darkness without consequences. Or did they seem to think that darkness wouldn't find a way to build itself up again? Or strike back? Or both? The Sith had been 'dead' for centuries, and so the Order hadn't believed Qui-gon when he'd spoken of a possible Sith. They hadn't *wanted* to believe. It had been easier to deny the dark existences and Qui-gon had paid for their lack of insight.

That had been the last straw. It had been why he'd chosen to leave the stagnating Order that would, in time (if they continued as they were), become as evil as that which it claimed it fought against or die out altogether.

The Jedi didn't want to see it.

And he couldn't be a part of that.

So he'd dedicated himself to doing what the Jedi couldn't seem to bring themselves to do and find the Sith. He'd initially wanted to eradicate them (and now, even if he didn't want to admit it, he could see some motivation of vengeance in his actions too) and then he

figured he could go about setting up his own Order, or just continue to act from the shadows if necessary, or even puzzle out a way to get the Jedi to see *reason*.

Then he'd found Lars, and after that Palpatine (well, Sidious). The man had admitted he was a Sith and then had spoken to him, given him an offer... and while it didn't fulfill his first goal, it most certainly helped to fulfill the second. What better way to get the Jedi to see what they otherwise refused to see than to show them what their neglect could do? Show them the consequences of their actions (or lack thereof) and then they would be *forced* to acknowledge what he'd been saying all along! They'd be forced to accept and adapt and then, hopefully, *change*.

The fact that Palpatine's offer promised knowledge from an entirely new area he'd never studied may have had something to do with it all as well. Quite the nice, added bonus.

All he had to do was accept Sidious... and it would go against everything he'd ever learned, thought, or worked for. It would definitely go against everything Lars had opened his eyes to. In more ways than one.

He couldn't decide whether it was worth it or not.

Yes, he did want the Order to change, and he wanted them to change for the better—to change to prevent what he saw happening to them if they didn't. But would he keep that goal if he accepted Palpatine and learned the ways of the dark side? Three months ago, he would have said that he most definitely could... but that was before he'd spoken with Luke Lars—former Sith Lord. That was before he'd gotten insight to one of the biggest mysteries to a Jedi—before he'd known just what the dark side did and how it worked in detail. The watered-down version just didn't do it justice.

Three months ago, he'd been so sure of himself. Now, though... Because if he did join Palpatine and did show the Order it's flaws like that, would he always want the Order to change for the better? Because he very much doubted that Palpatine wanted that. Oh, he'd hinted at it, sympathized and lent a friendly ear (very much *un*like any Sith Dooku had ever heard of), but Dooku wasn't stupid. He knew Palpatine wanted something more. Power, probably, although he didn't know exactly how the Chancellor of the Republic could possibly gain *more* power unless they got more systems under the Republic's control. Or maybe he wanted to change the laws so that he had more

control?

If it brought peace, Dooku didn't really care. Both of them could gain what they wanted if he played his cards right... or that's what Palpatine had built the situation up to look like. Before Lars, Dooku would have thought Palpatine was a man jumping at an advantageous situation. Now, though, he knew to look deeper.

And therein lay the source of his indecision.

What Palpatine said made sense and potentially offered Dooku a great deal of what he desired, but when he got down to the heart of the matter, what he ultimately wanted was for the Light to become lighter. For the Jedi to become better, like those they had stories of in the past. He wanted them to be able to do more good and not get caught up in terrible situations like those that had been littered throughout his career. He wanted the Jedi to be Peacekeepers again. He wanted to be able to take pride in his Jedi training, not shame...

He'd never realized how much of an idealist he was. Or how selfish.

The problem he found, was how that realization didn't seem to bother him quite so much as it should. He knew how both idealism and selfishness could affect people, even him. It blinded them. But he didn't think he was blind.

Then again, he'd thought that before and made bad decisions. Like Galidraan and the Mandalorians. Like with his most recent Padawan (although that had been less willful blindness and more hope that she'd just grow out of it). Like with Qui-gon on more than one occasion...

He still wanted to show the Jedi their shortcomings but he didn't want them *destroyed* (and somehow, he thought that might be in Palpatine's plans, no matter what he said otherwise). The Jedi may be corrupt, but they still did a lot of good, and they had the potential to do *so much*. He'd originally thought that if the darkness overtook the light, that eventually the light would be stronger for it. He still thought that, to an extent, but did that mean that the darkness really was the *only* way of controlling the light? Couldn't they attempt to realign the light without completely destroying what it had built (because the darkness would)?

He wasn't sure.

Was he willing to sacrifice himself if it meant that the Light would

return better than it had before? Yes. But only if he could guarantee that he could keep that goal—only if he didn't somehow push them further into the rut they'd found themselves in. There was no such guarantee if he turned. And yet...

He glanced at the datapad he'd been using to keep notes and make plans. It seemed he had reached an impasse. He'd have to make his decision soon... but he needed to speak with someone first. Two someone's, actually.

Nodding his head in determination, he walked over to where he kept his personal comm and picked it up, scrolling through his contacts on the holo-projector until he found the one he was looking for. Then he dialed the number.

A woman picked up on the other line. "Hello, this is Chancellor Palpatine's office. How may I help you?"

xXx

Anakin slept deeply that night, mainly out of pure exhaustion. Maybe that was why he dreamed so differently. Or perhaps it could have been the new lightness he felt, or that he'd made steps to learn to trust again, or the aligning of the stars for all he knew. It could have been any one, or all choices, or none of them and something else completely. Either way, he went to sleep in his initiate bed at the Temple. The next he knew, he was on Tatooine of all places.

He made a face at the two suns overhead and then at the wasteland around him. Behind him, he could hear the distant rumbles of a city, probably Mos Espa. Why was he here?

"Because while you may not like Tatooine and its deserts, you know them. You know how to handle what comes with the climate, and thus it's comfortable to you," a new voice said.

Anakin raised an eyebrow and turned to the newcomer.

"Qui-gon."

"Anakin."

"You know it's been years since I visited this wasteland," Anakin muttered as he looked out at the horizon again. The suns would set soon. It was his favorite time of day (if he could have such a positive outlook on any aspect of Tatooine).

"And yet, here we are instead of Naboo, or Coruscant, or even Mustafar."

Anakin scowled at that and his glare sharpened in warning. "I have never been comfortable on Mustafar. That was the point." It was why Vader had built his own headquarters there (well, one of them). Palpatine had only encouraged him.

The older-looking man raised his hands in concession. Anakin scowled, but he'd seen the Jedi's meaning. There were worse places to end up than Tatooine. But still...

They sat in silence for a length of time Anakin couldn't define before Qui-gon spoke. "I'm very proud of you, Anakin."

"For what?"

"For telling Master Yoda and Master Xio about your past."

Anakin looked down at his older, flesh hands, frowning. "I didn't have much of a choice."

Qui-gon shook his head. "Oh, you did. You could have found a way around it and they would have accepted it, even if they hadn't believed it. You know that."

The former Sith looked to the side away from Qui-gon. "I was just too stupid to contemplate that solution at the time." Or in too much of a panic.

But again, Qui-gon shook his head. "No. You have planned your way through far worse situations than that, with much higher stakes. Anakin, if you'd really not wanted to, you could have found a way out of it. You chose to share that information, and I am proud of you for it."

Somehow acknowledging the truth of his words felt wrong. Anakin frowned. His brain told him it was fine, but... well, he never got praised—not by those who mattered most (except Palpatine as a boy, but only now did he realize how that had been poisoned). As much as he'd always craved praise, he now found it difficult to really take in.

So in the end, he said nothing and allowed the uncomfortable silence to drag on. He wondered if it would have been just as difficult to take Obi-wan's praise, but somehow didn't think so. Then again, he so rarely got actual praise from Obi-wan that he could remember... was

that what really happened, just his fallible human brain unable to remember anything good or did the dark side twist those memories so badly that he couldn't recall the truth even now? It was a sobering thought.

Eventually, Qui-gon spoke again.

"I wonder what it would have been like had I a similar perspective while living to what I have now."

Anakin frowned at the change of topic. He also wondered what had happened to Qui-gon's usual 'here and now' attitude. He guessed that may have changed with his current perspective. He wasn't sure if death really changed how one looked at life, but he supposed it did. He couldn't really remember much that had happened after his own demise, if he had ever truly glimpsed it. He didn't know how long he'd been 'dead'. It could have been an eternity or a few moments. Still, he wondered if that, too, had somehow been affecting his perspective. He supposed it was plausible. Still...

"Isn't it useless to think of 'might-have-beens'?" he asked softly. He wasn't sure he really believed that (or maybe he just couldn't give up the might-have-beens himself), but it sounded like something Obi-wan would have said... all those years ago, when he'd still tried to steer his wayward Padawan in the right direction and Anakin had been so unwilling to listen.

The former Sith sighed. He really was a fool.

"Normally, I would agree to keeping to the here and now," Qui-gon said. "But you got another chance. Perhaps the practice of studying the past and the future isn't so useless as I once thought. As long as it doesn't take over your entire life or weigh you down."

The former Sith snorted. "How can the past *not* weigh me down? I have far too many regrets."

"And yet, you haven't given up. You haven't given in, either."

Anakin turned to stare at him incredulously. "You obviously have not been observing my actions, then. I have given into my base desires a minimum of three times since I returned."

"And you've come back each time," Qui-gon countered. "Wouldn't it have been easier to stay dark than it was to return to the light?"

For several seconds, Anakin just stared at the Jedi, unable to refute his words but unable to truly accept them either. "If I were who I should be—someone worthy of Luke and Padmé and Obi-wan—then I wouldn't have fallen to begin with."

"And yet look at what you've done. You're making steps to save billions—trillions—of lives and stop corruption from destroying so much good. A gram of prevention is worth a kilogram of cure. By paying your kilogram of cure right now, it has become prevention for the rest of us and is more than making up for all the cure in the universe."

It didn't *feel* like he was preventing anything. He still wasn't a hundred percent sure that the Jedi Order didn't need to fall or that the Empire needed to be prevented. People needed to *see* what the consequences of their actions were—to feel them and understand them and the pain such actions (or inaction as the case may be) caused both them and those around them. The Republic and the Galaxy at large needed that before they could truly regret.

Like him. He would give anything to erase his past entirely (from his own memories too)... but then the future would turn out the same and he'd fall and become Darth Vader all over again. He hated it, but he could live with his past actions if it meant he could stop himself from destroying everything—everyone he ever held dear and more (because he really couldn't seem to stop anything else at this point in time—his payments of 'prevention' must be falling short).

But how could he tell Qui-gon that? If he didn't already know.

So he decided to take the conversation back to the original topic Qui-gon had brought up. "Very well, I will ask: why do you wish a different perspective upon your younger self."

"Because then I wouldn't have been so short sighted. I feel I set you and Obi-wan up for failure. For that I am truly sorry."

Anakin appreciated the thought. He really did. But...

"My choices were my own, as were Obi-wan's."

"As were mine. I was not the... best Master for Obi-wan. Or anyone, really. I did not realize how utterly unhealthy my own outlook and actions towards others were—almost toxic at times. I accused the Council of being arrogant and shortsighted, not realizing that I had become just the same in my own way. There were so many times that

if I had either made myself clearer, followed the rules better or had at least given a good reason as to why I bent and broke them, Obi-wan may have been able to follow a better example when raising you. It may have made the difference. I think I may have hidden my inadequacies from the Order by hiding them from myself because I never deserved to have that boy as my Padawan.

"I realize it cannot be changed now, but I have been wanting to apologize to both of you for some time."

Anakin sighed again. The older man may have a point, but...

"Did you do the best you could?"

"I fear I did not."

"But you didn't try to actively undermine Obi-wan."

"No. That doesn't excuse some of what I did though."

"Perhaps not, but apology accepted nonetheless, Master Qui-gon."

The older man nodded his head. It didn't make anything he'd done wrong right, but it did seem to clear the air between them a bit. Anakin knew he'd done his best, and even if that wasn't 'good enough' per se, it was all the older man could give. It still wasn't 'okay', but now they could move past it and hopefully be better for it. That was supposed to be how this whole 'healing' thing worked, right?

"I'm also sorry about Siri."

Anakin blinked at that one.

"What?"

"Having you worry about another unstable Force sensitive with everything else going on in your life... well, I just wish the timing had been better. Unfortunately, that was the strongest she'd been in quite a while, and she couldn't keep it up. I had no guarantee she wouldn't fade away if we didn't act then. Still, it only added to your plate, and so I apologize for that."

This time Anakin shook his head. "No, that wasn't your fault at all. There is nothing to apologize for there. Besides, I've needed Siri, more than you... well, I really, could ever have known at the time."

"It still made things more difficult for you."

Anakin resisted snorting. "Somehow I believe I've become used to life throwing difficult situations in my direction. I suppose it comes with the territory of being the Chosen One, a Jedi who refuses to follow the Code and a recovering Sith Lord."

Qui-gon smiled slightly, not looking at Anakin. It was amazing how real this felt. Like it wasn't a dream at all. It had been a while since he'd had a vision or dream of this caliber.

"Can you tell Obi-wan I'm sorry?" Qui-gon asked softly. "It seems all I do is shunt my problems onto others, but I cannot speak with him in this situation. Believe me, I've tried." Anakin did believe it. Still...

"I don't know... if I can," he responded slowly. "Not only is our current relationship... different, but he probably wouldn't take it well right now."

The Qui-gon Anakin remembered would have probably accepted that with a disapproving frown and then moved on. This one, though, simply nodded sadly.

"Thank you for your honesty, and for trusting me with it."

It took a moment for Anakin to realize that he had let his guard down slightly and trusted Qui-gon a bit more than his past would have suggested. That mind-healing session must have gotten to him more than he realized... which said quite a lot.

"Thank you for recognizing it," he responded, hoping he didn't sound too awkward. If he did, Qui-gon didn't acknowledge it, for which Anakin was grateful. This whole sharing things was going to take some getting used to. He didn't think he'd ever be comfortable about it, even with those he felt safe around.

Although it was nice to feel even a modicum of safety again. He ignored the dark voice in the back of his head that kept whispering that it was a lie. That was his inner Sith – that blasted dragon – talking again and he was getting pretty good at ignoring it (thankfully). He could agree that he didn't deserve it, but he still wanted it. If he had peace, then maybe he could help others that *did* deserve it find it.

He turned his attention back to the desolate landscape, noting that the sand had shifted around them as they spoke, changing the shape of the landscape while never really changing anything at all. If this was his mind, Anakin wondered what that said about him.

"Well," Qui-gon said, standing... or had he always been standing? Maybe things hadn't been so clear as Anakin had thought. "Perhaps it is time to get going. Young initiates need their rest."

Anakin was torn between scowling and rolling his eyes. He wasn't that young.

"But your body is."

"My brain too," he muttered almost bitterly. Definitely leaning towards annoyance here. He'd most certainly noticed that his thought process, while similar to his older self because of experience, still didn't have the same capacity that his adult brain had had. His actions, while still remaining inside somewhat predictable parameters, hadn't been completely what an adult recovering Sith and slave would have been like. He couldn't decide if that was a positive development or not.

Qui-gon chuckled quietly. "I'll take my leave for tonight."

Anakin studied the tall figure. He still looked so steady and wise, and yet just seconds ago he'd seemed so *fragile*. Perhaps Anakin hadn't been the only one stepping out on a limb here.

"Thank you for speaking with me, Master Qui-gon."

"You as well, Master Skywalker."

The younger man's smile vanished. "I don't deserve that title."

"Perhaps not yet, but you will," Qui-gon returned, that twinkle in his eye never disappearing, even as he faded from view.

A sort of warmth sparked in his gut somewhere. It didn't spread, but it didn't fade quickly either. Anakin looked down at his adult hands again. No, he still didn't quite believe that he would ever be deserving of that title... but he wanted to be. Even if he never obtained it, to be worthy of such an honorific... well, it was an unobtainable but laudable goal. One he decided he would do his best to pursue. That, he supposed, was a start.

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Tai'k had a hard time getting up the next morning. And why not? The previous day had been exhausting to say the least, emotionally, mentally and physically. Still, she had things she had to do, appointments to make, responsibilities to fulfill, so she managed to

drag herself from her bed and get ready for the day.

One of those pesky responsibilities revolved around setting up a new appointment schedule for one Siri Tachi, to be looked over by both the girl and her Master. At that, she frowned. Did Adi-Gallia know about all of this? She highly doubted it. Tai'k had never liked keeping secrets from a Padawan's Master, but she'd have to discuss what she could and couldn't tell Master Gallia with the Grandmaster and Siri herself (and probably Anakin as well, if only to keep him in the loop).

Once this was all under control, she wondered if she should make a holocron on treating patients (especially Jedi) who had traveled through time. Then she wondered what her own Master would think of all of this. The look of utter disbelief on Master Crallig's wizened face... well, that would have been an amusing discussion. After indulging in that thought process for a few seconds, she brushed it from her thoughts and focused on the here and now. She had another session with an older Jedi who had lost his Padawan in a few hours and a Master/Padawan team that had been having problems with some of their recent missions after that. She didn't have time to get lost in thought.

Oh, and something else she needed to get started on today was an entirely new plan of attack for Anakin's therapy sessions. Based on what she now knew... well... The new outline would require a lot of study and research from her, and she even made a note to petition the Council for study on the dark side and what kind of effects it had on people. It wouldn't be easy to convince them, and when she did, it wouldn't be an easy subject either. She may even have to get into the Sith holocrons directly... although she didn't much care for that idea. However, if that was what it took to understand Anakin enough to treat him... well, she may want to make her own holocron on that as well.

She really, *really* hoped she was up to the challenge Anakin Skywalker presented, because if she wasn't, she had a feeling she wouldn't be the only one who would suffer the consequences.

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Anakin still felt light when he woke, which pleasantly surprised him. He also felt more refreshed than he had in a while. He'd skipped racing last night, but he hoped Bleersh would understand. Eh, who was he kidding? Bleersh would scowl at him and happily lecture him the next time they met. He'd taken to doing that recently, although it

mostly took the form of, 'It's none of my business, and I don't know anything about being a Jedi, but not showing up without even letting me know is bad for business.' If Anakin didn't know any better, he'd suspect the illegal manager actually cared. Maybe the initiate would find a way to get an untraceable call to him, or stop by tonight instead.

No matter what he did that night, though, he'd have to get through the day first. A day where three more people knew about him and his past. Suddenly the bright, new morning didn't seem quite so welcoming. He wondered how many people would know about him and his little secret by the time he actually got around to killing Palpatine.

Mentally he scolded himself. Honestly, he had no reason to believe anything would be worse this time... although it might be different. And here he'd worked so hard to gain his allies. Maintaining these bonds was harder than he remembered. Not that there was much he could do about it now, short of a memory wipe that could very well kill them. That didn't stop the whole situation from making him uneasy.

Seriously, this child's brain of his!

Sighing he logged into his computer mail account as he did every morning and found something there that both relieved and worried him. It was a request to meet from Count Dooku.

Chapter End Notes

AN: So, the reason I didn't update this earlier is because I got an original story idea that actually let me write it. I've been spending months on it and I'm actually almost done with it. 80,000 words and 2 revamps into it. It isn't anywhere nearly as deep as this is, seeing as it's geared towards teenagers, but keep an eye out for it. I'm not sure if I'll go with traditional publishing, online publishing or self publishing. If anyone is interested in a beta read, let me know. :)

Also, good news, the next two chapters are almost done! Woo hoo! But one of my beta readers has some nasty health problems right now, the second one had life and a job get in the way, so issues on the beta reader front, but those will hopefully be fixed soon.

Anyway, thanks again to Khalthar and Carradee for their help! You guys are amazing!

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yoda knew his species tended to live far longer than most other races. In a universe where commonly, species lived anywhere from a few decades to a couple of centuries, living for many centuries came with it's own perks... and curses. Sometimes Yoda wondered how other species could learn as much as they did with as little time as they had. He, himself, found that even after 800 galactic standard years, some things still surprised him. But that didn't happen often. Now, looking back on everything, he couldn't help but wonder if, in his later years, he'd become too set in his ways.

Age had crept up on him slowly, but, inevitably, it still came. He still tried to remain somewhat active, and knew when he was pushing his old body too hard, but he still had health issues and he needed to conserve the smaller reserves of energy he'd retained so that he could continue to support the Jedi Temple. He had once read about a person who described their energy with an analogy consisting of eating utensils – spoons. Yoda had consequently adopted the analogy. Getting up and ready for the day could take one or two spoons. Preparing a meal (or walking down to the cafeteria) costs another. Training, dealing with people, council meetings—they all took "spoons". The older he got, the fewer "spoons" he had to use, so he couldn't afford to waste his "spoons". Not when so many other beings relied on him.

He felt that the previous day's revelations had depleted his remaining "spoons" permanently, leaving his reserves smaller than ever and him feeling even older and more tired than normal (which, really, said quite a lot).

The Chancellor was a Sith.

Anakin came from a dismal future he strove to prevent.

Anakin used to be a Sith Lord.

Siri was from the same future – had died there.

According to her, the temple would be destroyed.

Both of them had such severe PTSD it was a wonder they could function at all. Yoda found himself stuck between being proud and horrified.

In their future – their universe – the Sith won, even if only for a few decades. It would be long enough to weaken any light or innate healthiness that remained in the already struggling universe. He wasn't sure that said universe could truly survive that. Oh, he knew that change came to any culture or civilization. It was as inevitable as age and death, but how many would die if the culture and events of the current Jedi and the Republic remained unchanged? Wasn't their recent status the will of the Force? But then, was it not also the will of the Force that Anakin had returned? Perhaps he had needed to make those terrible mistakes and choices, then face the consequences of his actions before he could truly make the changes he needed to?

Either way, a change was coming. Change always meant someone somewhere would get hurt. It would be up to the Jedi to minimize that pain. Could they do so? Or would they be caught up in the change themselves? Could the Jedi even survive what would inevitably come in the next few decades?

"Hmm," Yoda muttered to himself. Well he would just have to do everything in his power to see that the Order did survive... even if the Jedi didn't come out quite the same on the other side of the coming changes.

He noted that it was almost time for a Council meeting. The Force told him, in no uncertain terms, that telling the Council about Anakin right now was not a good idea. They wouldn't be able to handle it and wouldn't act according to the will of the Force. That greatly saddened the Grandmaster. Had the Jedi truly become that complacent? Yoda would have to prepare them... so perhaps now would be a good time to start introducing change.

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Anakin walked down the temple halls towards his room slowly as he thought over everything that had happened. He still couldn't seem to wrap his head around *Leia Organa* being his daughter (even if it felt right and some part of him wasn't surprised at all), and then Siri and Xio and Yoda and Qui-gon and Palpatine and Dooku and Coira and Maelee...

As if the whole situation hadn't been complicated enough already.

He'd have to find some way to figure these new developments all out too. And they still had to find a way to keep Coira (and Maelee, even though she wouldn't be as much of a problem as she wasn't a part of the Ambassador Program) away from Palpatine – hopefully without causing a temple-wide breakout, even if that was still the only thing he could come up with that he was even fairly sure would work.

He also hadn't heard from Fett for a while, not since he'd sent the updated list without his mother's (along with a few other's to hide it, and he'd have to do something about rescuing them himself in the future) names removed. Oh, and he'd just received word today that someone from the temple had approached his mother, but she wished (for some unfathomable reason) to remain on Tatooine, even if she was freed. They were still making arrangements for her release, thank the Force. He wondered if she'd met Cleigg Lars yet.

Then there was his impending meeting with a former/future/perhaps Sith Lord to contend with. He hadn't been so nervous regarding Dooku since his initial meeting with the man in this timeline. His possible ties to Sidious just made him so dangerous... and yet, he couldn't seem to bring himself to not answer the man and meet him. He'd thought he'd be able to just drop it, but he'd invested too much time and effort to not 'see it through', as his Obi-wan would say.

He didn't even want to think about his own inevitable meeting with Sidious or the man's plans for the galaxy.

At no time in his previous experience could Anakin remember having so much to do – so much resting on his shoulders. Seeing as he was supposed to be the 'Chosen One', that said quite a lot. It worried him, seeing as he'd broken under the pressure before. But then, he'd been a different person then. A blind fool who didn't know the true meaning of 'peace' or 'freedom' and who had no desire to learn. He was different now... he hoped.

"One thing at a time," the former Sith muttered to himself. He'd decided that he would meet with Dooku again, and that would happen tomorrow. He should get through that and his Force Techniques class without exploding first. Although, he didn't think that was much of a danger anymore, seeing as he felt far calmer and more at peace than he had since... well, since he'd died. He may not remember much, but that feeling of safety and calm was something he could recall, especially recently. He figured that as long as he kept the idea of reaching that state of being again as a goal, he'd have less chance of losing his way again.

"Anakin!" A high-pitched, breathless shout from behind had him turning around curiously. And if his hand crept towards where his lightsaber used to hang, well, there were few enough people around in the Jedi halls at this time of night to see. He'd just returned from talking to Bleersh (who seemed both relieved and annoyed to see him at the same time, not that he could blame the being). He hadn't planned on staying to race, so he hadn't bothered to wait to head down to the racing circuit until after curfew. Actually, he was rather surprised – if relieved – that he'd been able to make it back before said curfew. It was close enough, though, that he didn't expect to run into another initiate any time soon.

Naturally, it was Coira, followed (rather surprisingly) by Hale. His large, quiet presence seemed to ground the girl's excitable buoyancy. He was also, for the first time Anakin could remember, sporting a small, genuine smile. Huh.

Anakin turned his attention to Coira expectantly as she raced up to him.

"Anakin! Guess what!"

He raised an eyebrow and couldn't help but smirk at her enthusiasm. "What?"

"Master Xio just called me in today and said she," the girl paused and glanced at Hale, who was still a fair distance away, perfectly happy to take his time in walking towards them. "She said she had a solution for our problem."

Anakin blinked. "Oh?"

Coira nodded excitably. "She wants to take me on as a Padawan! She just asked me today!"

The former Sith blinked. Take Coira on as a Padawan? Just to avoid Sidious? The simplicity of the mind-healer's solution (even if he would have preferred she talk to him and Yoda first) boggled him. Why hadn't he thought of that? Why had he immediately jumped to the conclusion of creating an outbreak situation – of *hurting people* – to make something real enough to fool Palpatine? With Coira studying under a mind-healer Jedi, she would have to suddenly change her schedule and may not have time for the Ambassador Program. And Jedi Padawans were often chosen at this age. It would be hard for even Palpatine to suspect something.

Still, the implications almost made him gape. Taking on a Padawan wasn't the easiest thing to do. It meant long hours of dedication for years – maybe even decades. And somehow Anakin didn't think that Tai'k Xio would blow Coira off just because this was a possible solution and cover. The fact that she would do this, would be willing to, for him (for the Jedi and the Galaxy and for Coira herself) kind of blew his mind. He hadn't seen that kind of dedication since... well, Ahsoka, Obi-wan, Padmé and... Luke.

"Anakin?" Coira asked, worry dimming her excitement as Hale finally joined them.

The time-traveler blinked and managed a real smile. "I'm so happy for you, Coira."

Immediately her own grin returned. "We're moving into new quarters next week!" With that, she threw her arms around Anakin who stiffened. "It's all thanks to you, Anakin! Thank you, so much!"

"Um... you're welcome," Anakin said uncertainly as he awkwardly patted her on the back. She finally took a step away, coming to stand beside Hale, who exchanged knowing looks with Anakin. "I guess we just need to find a Master for Maelee now."

"No, you don't," Hale interjected.

Surprised, both of the other initiates turned to look at him. He shuffled a little under their scrutiny. "Maelee doesn't want to become a Knight. She's always said she wants to go into the Education Corps."

Anakin felt his jaw drop. He'd never heard of something like that.

"Oh, yeah," Coira said thoughtfully.

"Wait," Anakin said, holding up a hand, "she actually *wants* to go into the Jedi Service Corps?"

Hale nodded solemnly while Coira snickered. "Can you imagine her out in the galaxy with a lightsaber, trying to fight her way through bandits? Or being a body guard?"

Anakin did have to admit that the image that brought to mind did seem rather ridiculous... but he'd seen people overcome obstacles like that before. Besides, it still didn't seem to make any sense that she *wanted* to age out.

"She likes to learn and she likes to teach," Hale said softly. "The idea of never becoming a Padawan isn't one that bothers her." Well, Anakin had to admit that Maelee didn't seem like the kind of person to give into the social norms simply because they were the social norms, but still. Who wouldn't want to become a Jedi... ?

That thought made him pause. Who indeed. Maybe if Anakin hadn't been so dead-set on pleasing those people around him initially – on becoming a Jedi just to prove that he *could* – a lot of what had happened could have been circumvented. But he'd been so dead-set on becoming a Jedi Knight, like what his mother wanted. Later, the idea of disappointing Obi-wan was what kept him in the Order – that, and wanting to gain the power of a Council member because of his lousy slave mentality.

Wow, he was screwed up. The realization as to just how badly had made a habit of smacking him upside the head on a fairly regular basis recently.

"I wish I could have been more like her," he muttered to himself.

"Could have been?" Hale asked, a puzzled frown slipping across his tanned skin.

"Hmm," Anakin muttered, trying to remain as casual as he could, seeing as Coira had stiffened at his slip too. "I guess I wish I could still be like her: Figuring out what was best for me and having the courage to take that path no matter the opinions of my peers. I'm not that strong. I don't think I ever have been."

Thankfully, Hale's puzzlement turned thoughtful and Coira's shoulders slumped in relief. That wouldn't have worked with a Senator or a Sith or even an older Jedi, but then, these were 10-year-old kids. Well, Hale had just turned 11 he believed.

"You're stronger than you think," Hale said suddenly. Anakin blinked and Coira turned, wide-eyed, to her larger companion. The dark-eyed boy just shook his head. "You seem to think everyone around you has desirable traits, but if you do anything good, you tend to brush it off. Just because you can't see the good you do or the strength you have doesn't mean it isn't there."

And the 'intelligent, all-too-perceptive initiate' syndrome struck again.

"You too, Coira," Hale said as he turned to her. "You deserve to be a Padawan. Believe that." Coira blushed at his words, although she

didn't seem to look displeased. Surprised, but not displeased.

"Thank you, Hale," she whispered.

Anakin couldn't help but wonder why in the Universe Hale seemed to think the time-traveler acted 'older' when of the six of them (Hik'te, Hale, Coira, Maelee, Thoran and Anakin), Hale was the most mature. Maelee gave him a run for his money, but she had a sort of bossy, superior attitude while the larger boy was just genuinely thoughtful.

"Perhaps we should all retreat to our rooms before curfew?" Anakin said, noting a disapproving scowl from a passing Knight. They really were cutting it close. He didn't really want to have any more all-too-deep discussions in the middle of a hall anyway. Besides, Hale had given him a lot (even more) to think about... even if it felt more like he'd given Anakin a reprieve of some kind.

"Right," Coira agreed, starting off towards the initiate's quarters. Even though she seemed to have calmed down, she looked lighter somehow than he'd ever seen her before. Anakin couldn't help but wonder as he glanced back at Hale if, now, he did too.

xXx

Just because you can't see the good you do or the strength you have doesn't mean it isn't there. Anakin thought over that phrase again and again after he'd shut the light off and stared into the blackness his room fell into. He really needed to get to sleep, but Hale's words just kept running through his head.

He hadn't realized how much he'd missed having someone there to support him, no matter what. It was a good feeling. But still...

Just because I can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there. I wonder if I can ever believe that.

xXx

Anakin found Dooku at the bar they'd decided to meet in this time. Anakin thoroughly stalked the place out and even had a few remote droids with recording devices set up in a few places where snipers and other such undesirables might go in an attempt to catch him. He'd seen Dooku walk in alone and could sense no one following him. He had been unable to spot any droids trailing the man either, and had a hard time keeping track of the Count himself when he'd hacked into the security holo-cams around the area, which suggested that the ex-

Jedi had somehow implanted a worm into the security system that would hide his facial recognition.

Which, really, explained so much about the Clone Wars.

He'd still waited almost half an hour before he had dared go in.

As usual, the elder man was sitting at a booth, waiting for him when he walked into the dim atmosphere clogged by smoke and the odd florescent light. Anakin had chosen this kind of place to break the cycle of meeting in middle to upper-class restaurants. May as well break precedent.

"I've taken the usual steps to ensure our secrecy, and I'm sure you have a jammer yourself."

Four, actually, but Dooku didn't need to know that, so Anakin just nodded. For a moment silence stretched between them before the Count spoke.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," the ex-Jedi said as Anakin slid onto the worn synth-leather across from him.

"I almost didn't," he replied tersely. This guy needed to know he was on thin ice with 'Luke Lars'.

"What changed your mind?" Dooku asked, now staring intently at Anakin, who shook his head.

"Selfish reasons, sadly," he replied with a sigh.

For a moment, he thought the older man would press it, but he simply let it go with a mild comment and a sip of his drink. "The fact that you can admit that is respectable."

Behind the mask, Anakin raised an eyebrow, having not expected such a comment from the man (and not one he actually believed). Still wouldn't hurt to be polite. "Thank you."

Dooku merely shrugged.

"You asked for a meeting," Anakin said, deciding that they'd had enough preamble.

"Indeed," the older man acknowledged with a nod of his head and another drink before he put it down and folded his hands on the table in front of him. It really bothered Anakin how much that reminded

him of Obi-wan. "I have a few questions to ask you before I make a... rather delicate decision. Your answers today my very well affect the outcome."

Anakin felt the lump of ice-cold carbonate begin to build in his stomach.

"You said you want to bring down the Sith, specifically the head Sith, but not to take his place. So, why?"

He's asking what's in it for me, Anakin realized and frowned. Didn't mean he'd make it easy on him. He really didn't want to say 'revenge'. Besides, this was more prevention than anything.

"For a better universe."

Dooku didn't look impressed. "I mean you, personally. What made you return to the light at all? What was your reasoning at the time? And why go after the Sith? I know you are not doing so out of some misguided Jedi fear or habit, but while you hold a great deal against the Sith, you have never quite struck me as a man who doesn't act without a personal reason. So why?"

Anakin wanted to sigh, but he didn't. He knew he'd gone over all of this before, but somehow Dooku wanted something more, and he wasn't completely sure what. Even if he did know, he wasn't sure he could give it to the man.

So he started with the easiest question.

"I believe I told you before that I returned to the light because I was finally able to see past my own nose and start caring for others again," he said. Then a little quieter, "I learned to see the truth for what it is, and not what I wanted it to be." Even if, deep down, he hadn't really *wanted* reality to be the horrible place he'd come to see it as when he'd become Vader.

Dooku's brow furrowed ever so slightly. "Truth?"

Anakin shook his head. "I will reiterate that the Sith Code mixes truth and lies to entrap people, and that Palpatine does the same. I got hung up on the obvious truths pointed out to me and ignored other things that would have led me to the hidden ones. I... " Somehow he felt like he was back in therapy with Girth, analyzing his feelings... and realizing that he wasn't nearly as good at it as he'd assumed. "I was encouraged to see the twisted truths Palpatine spun. He highlighted

exactly what he knew would appeal to me and I learned to see the galaxy through the lenses he created. Once I forced myself to see past that, I couldn't hold to the lies that are now so obvious."

He leaned forward. "And that is the reality of the dark side. It twists your view so that what it wants you to see is what you take as truth, no matter what real truth is. It creates a... perception filter of sorts, one that blocks out whatever it doesn't want you to see." Just like when he'd seen Padmé hurt, and then she was critically hurt, and then she was dead on Naboo just after he'd come back. It was so clear to him now that he almost couldn't understand why he couldn't see it then. Almost.

The former Sith sat back in his bench as the waitress came around and asked if he wanted anything. Dooku ordered another of what he was having while Anakin declined.

Once she left, the older man cocked his head slightly to one side. "You claim that you learned to see the truth as it is. How can you be sure that what you know now is real truth, seeing as you've been deceived before?"

A younger Anakin would have bristled at the comment. The older Anakin decided not to take offense and thought about the question. He didn't answer for several seconds, trying to put his thoughts into words. "I traveled as far as I could down the dark path as I felt that the light would hold me back. It had too many rules and too many things I had to work at that I found too difficult. I felt it was all a waste of time. When I chose darkness after that, it felt as if I were far more free than I'd ever been... and yet, it chained me down. It became addicting and thus limited my choices, because whatever I chose had to fall under those addictions and limitations. Even now, knowing all I do, knowing how much pain and weight – both emotional and physical in my case – held me down, I am still tempted. A part of me still wants to believe that power is all I need to be set free.

"But in the end, the light and its rules – self discipline and kindness – are what has allowed me to find real freedom. And that is the truth I have found. The darkness holds no permanent solutions, only instant gratifications that become a chain you've built, piece by piece, and it holds you down."

Dooku was holding his chin thoughtfully. At least he didn't do what Obi-wan did and stroke his beard. The familiarity between a Light Dooku and Obi-wan was uncanny enough.

"But that isn't all of it, is it," the Count finally said. He didn't ask it.

Anakin frowned but forced himself to remain relaxed. Dooku would catch the body language if he tensed. He made himself nod because he didn't see a point in denying it... although he wasn't sure whether he wanted to tell Dooku his other reason. Then again, there would be little reason for Dooku to realize just who he was talking about and if it could sway the decision, he might stop Dooku from making the worst mistake of his life.

"Returning to the light," Anakin started slowly, "and destroying the Sith is the only way I can guarantee the people I need to live will live. Or at least, it will give them a better chance. That is why I want to destroy the Sith." He hated giving away vulnerabilities like that, and it was a gamble. He crossed his fingers and prayed to the Force and any deities out there that might listen to him that Dooku would understand.

Fortunately, his words seemed to be what the Count was looking for because his forehead smoothed out and he nodded. "Are those your selfish reasons that you mentioned earlier?"

Anakin thought back before he nodded. "Yes."

"I see," Dooku said as he finished his first drink. The waitress had dropped his second one by not seconds ago.

He drained the cup and then set it on the table, scooting it towards the middle. "Well, I have indeed made up my mind, and you did help the decision quite a bit."

Anakin's eyes widened behind his mask, surprised at the other man's bluntness.

"As you have undoubtedly guessed, Palpatine has asked me to join him. I must admit, he made his offer quite appealing."

The former Sith frowned. *I've told him now to look through the lies. What is he getting at? He needs to just tell me what he decided.*

"It was a possibility. So, what is your decision?" Anakin asked slowly, ignoring the lump in his stomach that had grown into a blizzard. The way he worded it did not sit well with Anakin. Maybe he'd misread things and Dooku was a Sith already? No, that didn't make sense... and yet...

"I ask you to hear out my reasoning before you do anything," Dooku replied with a shake of his head. "You see... I have decided to accept his offer."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yup, there you have it. Don't make assumptions just yet though. ;)

As always, thanks so much to my beta readers Carradee and Khalthar! Also, I haven't worked through everyone who offered to be a beta reader for my original story, so I may be contacting you yet if you haven't gotten word from me. I really appreciate everyone who offered. Seriously, thank you. I've been going through and revamping my story like crazy and changing...so much. ^^; It's been overwhelming, but so worth it. :)

Now a few things: Firstly, HA! I got it up by the end of the next month! (it's only about 8 here, so bwahahahahaha!) Secondly, for those of you who speak French and German better, I've gotten two people who have offered to translate Hindsight and Foresight into both. HOW COOL IS THAT?! 3 Now I just need a TV tropes page and someone who approaches me and asks me to write a bunch of Star Wars Expanded Universe and I'll have arrived! *Insert thunder and lightning and evil laughter here* ;) (JK :D I think it's awesome I have so many awesome followers so far, so thank you for the support!). Sorry for the dramatics. Dwts has kind of sucked me in and the Halloween episode rocked. (Lindsey, Frankie and Victoria FTW!) (Hey, It's Halloween, I'm allowed to show some of my crazy, tangent-prone side.)

For the German translation, go to fanfiktion.de and search for *'Danger of Foresight'* and it should come up. For the French, it's on fanfiction.net. *Voyager Dans le Temps Ne Signifie Pas Tout Arranger Pour Autant* (which more or less translates into 'Traveling to the Past doesn't mean you'll fix everything). Show these guys some love, yeah? They are taking time out of their busy schedule and that just means the world to me! Also, Adalas translated my story *Turning His Back* into French as well. Seriously, guys, I can't tell you how awesome you are. <3

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I ask you to hear out my reasoning before you do anything," Dooku replied with a shake of his head. "You see... I have decided to accept his offer."

The anger didn't really surprise Anakin. (Funny how quickly surprise could be turned into anger.) The betrayal did. After all, this was *Count Dooku* of all people. How had he gotten to a point where he'd hoped for—*expected*, even—otherwise? Why did he feel that betrayal? Really, this was all Anakin's own fault for even—

"You hide your emotions well," Dooku said quietly.

That was about all it took to crack his facade and he hated that. Anakin grit his teeth, struggling to keep said emotions under control. "So that's your choice. After everything I've told you?" he managed to get out.

Dooku shook his head. "You misunderstand. I won't be accepting to learn of the darkness, nor will I accept for any reason he gave. I will be accepting him to help you destroy him."

And that fast, the Anger vanished, leaving Anakin feeling rather empty. He blinked, as if doing so would help him comprehend faster. It didn't help.

"Excuse me?" he finally asked, almost unable to understand Dooku's words. It just... didn't fit with anything he'd ever known about the man.

The older man took another sip of his drink. "I contacted and spoke to some psychology specialists: therapists, mind-healers, teachers, researchers, etc. I spoke with thirty-seven people and described Chancellor Palpatine to them without naming names or giving specifics. Of those thirty-seven people, thirty-three told me I described the near-definition of a psychopath. I suspect the other four were... 'toxic' is the term that kept coming up."

Anakin wanted to ask if one of those specialists was Girth, but decided that the fewer hints he gave to his identity, the better, and refrained.

They didn't know who was listening in right now. Even though Dooku said they were safe and Anakin had taken precautions as well, it wasn't impossible to find a way around those protections.

Besides, there was still a large chance Dooku was playing him.

"I see," he finally said as he finally wrapped his mind around all of that. Then he took a calming breath and fixed his gaze on the other. "You are still joining a psychopath and putting yourself – and more lives than you may realize – at risk." Anakin commented, noting with some relief that the voice filter didn't seem to pick up the slight desperation in his tone.

Dooku shrugged and took another graceful sip. "To cover both ends."

"Both ends?" The filter did pick up his dry tone.

"From what you've told me, and from what I've observed myself, he has contingency plans for all of his multiple contingency plans."

"Yes," Anakin responded slowly.

"And he does not fear death," Dooku half asked, half pointed out.

The former Sith frowned. "No. He wants to rule as long as he can and will do anything to maintain that control. If that helps him defy death, then all the better, but he does not shy away from the subject."

Dooku nodded. "I suspected as much. So he has contemplated his own demise and prepared for it. You have stated that you are going to bring about his downfall – that same demise. Is that still your goal?"

Anakin blinked at that and looked down as he contemplated that thought. "I want him to pay for his crimes, and I won't rest until I have brought about the downfall of the Sith." But the idea of actually killing Palpatine made him uneasy somehow, and he couldn't figure out why.

He'd day-dreamed about Obi-wan's death for years (he still fought the inclination even now simply because it was a habit), and he'd planned Palpatine's defeat... but somehow, the man had simply ended up dead in those fantasies... not really by Anakin's own hand. He shook his head, why should that bother him? He'd always known he may have to kill Sidious, and part of him wanted to, but part of him felt his stomach churn uncomfortably at the thought. Which made no sense. He'd killed Sidious himself in the future. And yet the idea of running a lightsaber through the man both excited and sickened him.

"Of course," he forced himself to say. If he had to kill Palpatine to defeat him, then so be it. Right? "But... "

"You are afraid he will find a way out of it," Dooku finished.

Anakin thought about that. Yes, the idea that Palpatine couldn't really be defeated (that he hadn't even succeeded in the future) was part of it... but not all of it. Dooku didn't need to know that.

"Yes," he said softly.

"That is why. I want him to think I am on his side so that I can have access to at least some of those secrets."

Anakin took a deep breath. Focus on the here and now. Take things one step at a time.

"Just to get this straight," — Anakin looked around, even though he could sense no one else near — "we're talking about assassinating the Chancellor of the Republic."

"A corrupt chancellor of a corrupt Republic."

"Indeed," Anakin muttered. He couldn't argue with that.

"If I am in his good graces, then I might be able to head off the repercussions on the Republic and the Jedi; lessen the damage if I cannot stop it completely," Dooku continued and finished his drink. He signaled for the waitress again.

Anakin thought back over their conversation and felt his brow furrow. "It's a good idea, but I don't think the... execution of the plan," he said as he eyed the waitress as she came over, "will be quite so easy."

"Another," Dooku said to the blue-haired human-like woman who had oddly-shaped spots around her face, shoulders and stomach. It was fairly visible due to what she'd chosen to wear for the evening.

"Comin' right up, honey," she said with a wink and turned to walk away.

Once she was out of hearing range, Dooku cocked his head at Anakin. "You don't think I can resist the temptation of the darkness for even that long? A few months – a year at most?"

Anakin allowed himself to sigh. "Firstly, that wouldn't be nearly long enough for him to reveal his secrets to you, and secondly... no. I don't

think anyone can resist the dark side for that length of time. I do not believe even Master Yoda could pretend to turn, use the dark side and then just give it up, even if it were only for a few days, let alone months."

He tried to imagine the diminutive master having fallen and couldn't. The idea just didn't seem to want to be complete, although it went beyond terrifying. With his age and control of the Force... . After a few moments contemplation, Anakin brought himself out of his thoughts to see Dooku watching him intently.

"Do you disagree?" Anakin asked, ready to jump into a tirade of how Dooku couldn't possibly know as much as 'Luke Lars' did about the dark side at this point.

Instead, Dooku spoke slowly, as if trying to figure something out. "You know Master Yoda personally?"

Anakin's blood froze and he reverted to his pre-Vader days with all of the curse words he thought (in multiple languages) to himself. And here he'd been so careful. This was why he hated politics and talking things out. This was Padmé's, Obi-wan's and even Dooku's strong point, not his! Even as Vader he'd tended to choke first and ask questions later (or never, as the case may have been).

"Are you a Jedi?"

For several seconds, Anakin didn't answer. When he did, he took a deep breath to calm himself down and fixed Dooku with his own gaze, not caring whether the man could see his eyes or not.

"Count Dooku, you are about to walk into the clutches of a man who has haunted my nightmares and may very well bring the universe to its knees. I ask that you forget that question for both of our sakes." Of course, Anakin was still hoping that Dooku *wouldn't* choose to reveal himself, but it was a valid point. Dooku would most likely still hear the subtext, but there wasn't much Anakin could do about that right now.

The older man contemplated that for several moments before conceding with a nod. "Very well."

Anakin bit his lip, grateful again for the mask, before he spoke next. He asked himself what his Obi-wan would have said in this situation. "Will you not reconsider?"

Dooku sipped on his third drink. Funny, he didn't look even the least bit tipsy. Either it was a weak drink or the man had impressive alcohol tolerance. "I am not in the habit of not following through with my decisions."

Anakin felt his heart sink, but he couldn't give up just yet. He wracked his brain and came up with one last gambit.

"Do you believe in fate?" he asked quietly.

Dooku seemed surprised by the question, but to his credit, he gave it due thought. After a moment, and a few more sips of his drink, he answered. "If you would have asked me that last year, I would have said 'no'."

Even though the other man couldn't see it, Anakin raised one eyebrow curiously. "And now?"

"I am unsure," Dooku replied. "But lately, too much of... this," he gestured around them vaguely, and Anakin was pretty sure he didn't mean the bar, "seems too contrived."

The time-traveler snorted. It actually came across through the vocoder, surprisingly. "True," he said bitterly.

"I suppose that we could simply chalk that up to the Force, but who is to say that we do not have our own fates in the Force?" Dooku didn't look particularly happy as he voiced that thought. Then he looked back at Anakin, puzzled.

"Why do you ask?"

Anakin took a deep breath. He didn't like how much he would be revealing if he said what he'd thought, but... it felt right. Was it the Force? Yes, it was a nudge, barely there, but it felt like the Force. He swallowed softly and opened his mouth.

"I have dreams – visions – often of the future. In many of them, you fall. It is the reason why I sought you out to begin with and how I knew you'd be searching for *him*."

Dooku blinked in surprise. Anakin couldn't remember a time when he'd seen the man caught flat-footed. If it were any other situation, he might have laughed aloud. Well, pre-Vader Anakin may have. Then the man reached a hand up and massaged between his nose (again, all to similar to Obi-wan – why hadn't he noticed this before?).

"Why did you not just say that initially?" he asked in a near groan.

Anakin shrugged. "I didn't trust you."

Dooku looked up, one eyebrow raised. "You do now?"

The former Sith chuckled humorlessly. "I am unsure."

The two of them sat in silence for a few more moments, each lost in their own thoughts.

"So," Dooku said finally, "you think it is my fate to fall."

Anakin tried not to wince, he really did. "Perhaps," he said softly. "I... hope not."

"You hope? Somehow that doesn't seem quite like you."

"You have no idea," Anakin returned dryly.

Dooku looked thoughtful for a moment. "Why do you 'hope' I will not fall, then?"

Anakin licked his lips. "Because in those visions, you... aren't the only one to fall. And if you are fated... "

"Then perhaps the others who fall are also fated to do so," Dooku finished, tapping a finger to his chin in thought.

"Indeed," Anakin said softly.

Dooku mulled that over for several minutes, and the time traveler let him. He'd put his cards on the table, now it was time to see who had the better sabacc hand. Dooku finished his drink and then went to stand, placing some credits on the table. Anakin felt his heart sink. Somehow he knew what the Count would say.

"I'm afraid that you still have not convinced me, Mr. Lars. I will contact him tomorrow and let him know that I accept his offer.

"Also," he stood straight and rummaged around in the pocket of his jacket, "one final thing. Here is a comm frequency as well as a holoweb address." He slid a piece of flimsy across the table, face down. "This is for you. Palpatine would like to meet you."

Anakin's fists clenched under the table, making his arms creak. He stared at the paper as if it should spontaneously combust. "No." He

refused to lose control of his emotions this time. He *refused* to give *that man* the satisfaction.

Dooku shrugged. "I promised I would give you the information. Do with it what you will. I will admit, I expected nothing less."

The former Sith watched his contact walk away, fighting both the anger bubbling in his chest and the depression coiled in his gut that seemed to get heavier with every step the man took. Somehow the whole bar seemed dimmer now.

Then he put his hand up and the waitress came over. "Want somethin' now, honey?"

"A lighter," Anakin said. The woman raised one of her painted-on eyebrows but reached into the pocket of her admittedly short skirt and fished out a small lighter.

"Here ya go, honey."

"Thank you," he said as he grabbed the piece of flimsy and lit it on fire. Watching it burn only brought him a little satisfaction. He couldn't help but be reminded of a funeral pyre for some reason. Perhaps he would mourn the loss of a Master of the Light here and now, seeing as he doubted anyone else would do the same now or in the future. That light would be tarnished, spotted, tainted and corrupted, most likely far faster than Dooku could imagine at this point. It would wither and die, leaving nothing but a horrible, gaping monster in its place.

Dooku thought he could fight the darkness for a little while. Arrogant, desperate man. He saw how dangerous Sidious was, at least. That didn't stop Anakin from concluding that he would soon be dealing with Darth Tyrannus again in place of Count Dooku. The flames on the flimsy began to die down in the ash tray fixed to the middle of the table. Somehow, with this setback, he couldn't help but see that piece of paper as his whole future... and he couldn't seem to find a way to stop it from burning down to ash.

xXx

"Alright, I'm just going to get to the bantha in the room right away," Master Xio said to Anakin and Yoda the next day. They would have involved Siri, but the healers had put up more of a fuss about her leaving the previous time than any of them really wanted to deal with right now. The blond had just waved them off when Anakin and Xio

had gone to see her earlier that day, saying she'd catch up later.

So, now the three of them sat in the mind-healer's room, each trying not to suffocate under the thickness that had settled around them before the only woman in the room broke the tension.

"What are we going to tell Healer Girth?" she asked.

Anakin's grip on his cup of tea, courtesy of Master Xio's foresight, tightened and he looked down. There wasn't much of a choice, really.

"We can't tell him anything," he said softly. The two masters turned to look at him as he continued. "I... hate it, I really do, but he has a connection to me, and I will be going into the Ambassador program. Even if *that man* has no other reason, it is enough for him to investigate. He is looking for acolytes and possibly an apprentice." Anakin took a bracing breath and tried to sound steadier than he felt. "He will focus on me. I will make him ignore the others, if I have to. When that happens, he will investigate and Girth will be a weak link. His mind is open and unprotected. I don't believe we have a choice."

"Admirable, your efforts to protect the younglings, are," Yoda said softly. "But so quick to sacrifice yourself, you should not be."

The master's soft voice sounded rather different from the hard disappointment he'd gotten from the same being this morning. Anakin shook his head as he tried to focus on the current situation.

"The other initiates won't understand and they will have little to no preparation for his machinations. I, on the other hand, know most of his tricks. I am, by far, the most prepared."

"Be that as it may, you will also be, in some ways, the most susceptible to him," Master Xio stated, her voice quiet but firm. "When faced with previous conditions, people tend to fall back into habit, no matter how painful they once were."

The former Sith's mouth tightened and he made a conscious effort to open his mouth and sip the tea. He couldn't voice his fear that she was right. He didn't want to go back to being Vader... that poor, pathetic, desperate excuse for a man who kept trying to control his future, only to see that control slip farther and farther away.

Master Xio shook her head and went on. "The thing is, Anakin, Healer Girth is your mind-healer too, and a very good one at that who fits well with you. He will not be able to completely help you unless he

knows. I know you trust him."

Anakin almost managed a smile at that. Almost. "He is one of the few beings I have met who just want to help, for no other reason," he muttered. Oh, sure, he got *paid* for it, but somehow Anakin had gotten the impression that the money wasn't the main motivator for the drall. More of a side-perk than anything.

"What if, a place in the temple, we offer him? Protection, hmm?" Yoda suggested.

Anakin frowned. "That would draw attention to him. If he's in the temple and protected, then Sidious will grow suspicious. Why bring an outside mind-healer here? Why protect him unless he has something to hide?"

"And what of his other clients?" Master Xio asked. "Will they be allowed to come here for treatment or would he have to drop them? From what I understand, he has around fifteen other cases."

Yoda frowned. "If protect him, we do, then allow other clients in, we cannot. Compromise his security, they will."

"Is there no way to protect him?" Master Xio asked. "A Jedi escort or the like?"

Anakin shook his head. "Again, it would draw too much attention. And besides, we do not know how long his services will be needed. And will he continue to get protection after that? Because he will still be a possible weakness and source of information." He shook his head again. "No, it's too dangerous. For him and everyone else."

The white-haired woman let out a breath. "Whatever we choose regarding him will have consequences. We've spoken of what may happen if we allow him to stay on. However, if we rescind our invitation to him for his services... well, he has been an immense help and I do not think any of us would be where we are now without him." Anakin agreed whole-heartedly, but couldn't decide whether that was positive or negative. He liked that he'd made some progress mentally, but was that worth his secret getting out? Was it worth all of this headache right now? He wondered if he would have still told his secret without his history with Girth. Somehow, he didn't think so. But he'd taken so many risks in doing so.

"Know, we always have, that possible risk, he is," Yoda commented, leaning his chin on his gimmer stick and looking at the ground as if

lost in thought.

"I still don't think we can allow it," Anakin muttered, eyes also turning to the floor and the muted, if well-cared-for carpet he saw there.

"Shouldn't that be his choice?" Master Xio's voice spoke softly, almost sadly.

Yoda's ears quirked as he turned to her. "What mean you?"

She took a breath. "I already told him that Anakin had a breakthrough. We let him know that we cannot explain it to him without severe risk that involves the lives of many other sentients. We inform him, as best we can in vague rems, then give him the options and see which he chooses." She looked over at Anakin, sadly. She didn't say anything, but he saw the warning in her gaze, and he agreed. Most likely, Girth will choose to stay with his other patients. He would be helping them too and even though it would have ticked him off in his original universe, Anakin had come to realize that, chosen one or not, the galaxy didn't revolve around him.

Anakin nodded, more surprised at the dismay he felt than the conclusion he came to.

"Maybe he'll come up with something we haven't looked at yet," she said, probably more out of pity for Anakin than anything else. He felt his expression cool. He still didn't need pity. Besides, something three Jedi, one a Grandmaster, one a mind-healer and one a former Sith didn't think of? That bordered on impossible.

He didn't say anything either way and was very proud of himself for it.

xXx

Girth had been obviously excited when he'd shown up at the temple that afternoon and told them how anxious he was to hear about Anakin's breakthrough. Thus he'd been understandably surprised when the Jedi explained the situation to him.

At first he could only stare at them with his beady eyes and twitchy nose, just blinking as he tried to absorb what they'd explained to him. Then he put a hand up to stroke the fur on his chin.

"So, this breakthrough revolves around something so utterly risky that you cannot tell me about it, even though I have signed the non-

disclosure documents?" he asked.

Anakin wanted to sigh. He refrained, but it was a close thing. Girth didn't get it. As a non-Force-sensitive, he... probably couldn't. But they'd agreed that they'd try to get him to understand. Even Yoda had said he'd try. Anakin almost considered that a win for the week.

"Your options are to drop Anakin as a patient or come and live in the Temple where you would have to drop your other patients," Master Xio said, not unsympathetically. "It's that much of a risk."

"I don't understand," Girth said with a frown. "Why would such actions be necessary? I would never divulge confidential patient knowledge without the proper authority – being that of you, your direct guardian or the proper channels of the courts. Even the Senate couldn't order me to share anything without that." He glanced at Anakin, trying to look as open as he could and Anakin could feel his sincerity. "If you no longer wish to be a patient of mine, then I will accept that. It is your choice, after all. However," his features firmed, "if it is for the reason you have given me, I must protest. I've even taken steps to guard against droid and technological intrusion. I can assure you that—"

"It won't help," Anakin interrupted coldly. "He doesn't need droids to get inside your head."

At that Girth froze, gaze focused on Anakin.

"You must understand," the former Sith said quietly, but his voice sounded firm, "this 'breakthrough', as you have called it, revolves around a man who is, like us; Force-sensitive. By telling you this alone I might be putting your life in danger, but he can use the Force to get inside your head, rummage around and leave you unable to so much as scream. And he isn't the most sadistic person I've met, but he won't make it painless. He will leave you to die in agony."

Master Xio was shooting him a mildly put-out look. "And here I thought you weren't impulsive."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Then I am a better actor than anyone has given me credit for." In his initial youth 'impulsive' had practically been his middle name. "Haven't we discussed this before?"

"Give away too much too fast, you did. Need his permission to do so, we agreed," Yoda admonished with a frown.

Anakin sighed. Yes, he'd tried to remain vague, but Palpatine could

still figure out they knew about him from what he'd said. A simple mind-reading could implicate all three of the Jedi in the room at that moment. He didn't know what kind of contingency plans the man had in place right now, but Anakin didn't want to test them, or Palpatine himself for that matter. Not yet. The longer he could put that off, the better, in his opinion (well, he knew that wasn't the case, but it *felt* right – it was good to feel again and still seemed novel for all he'd been at this for almost a year now).

"Apologies," Anakin said, meaning it. They were, after all, right. He kicked himself for that stupid haste even Palpatine couldn't seem to beat out of him.

Right about then, they all realized the rodent-like being was staring at them in horrified shock.

"J... Jedi can do that?"

All three of the Force-sensitives in the room slumped a little.

"Unlimited, the Force is. Limits, only we as mortals have," Yoda replied.

"Every sensitive has their own strengths and weaknesses," Master Xio explained, trying to sound reassuring. "The most common traits are physical – enhanced speed, strength, telekinesis, enhanced reflexes, etc. Less common are traits such as visions and healing. And then we get into things like psychometry – the ability to read and see the past of objects – and other mind arts such as empathy and telepathy. I, myself, have a talent for empathy. I can read people through the Force a little easier than other Jedi can. It's part of the reason why I became a mind-healer. So, yes, some Force-sensitives can, theoretically, do what Anakin spoke of, if they'd been born with the talent and had known how to cultivate it."

The smaller mind-healer just gaped at her for several seconds before he shook his head, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, obviously trying to gather himself.

"You keep saying: 'force-sensitive', not 'Jedi'. Why?"

The three Jedi exchanged glances.

"We can only tell you this if you agree to come to the Temple for protection," Master Xio insisted.

Girth shook his head. "I have too many other patients. Asking me to drop them right now, when I have too many of them in crucial stages of their recovery, goes beyond what I can do."

Anakin felt his heart sink just a little. He'd known it was coming, but he'd also really gotten to where he liked the little drall.

"Isn't there a way to shield my mind or something?" Girth asked, sounding as frustrated as Anakin felt.

He still doesn't get it, Anakin thought. The former Sith couldn't hold in a sigh at that thought. He knew that Girth understood better now, but he still didn't really *understand* what Sidious would do to him if he ever found him. No, *when* he found him because even if Girth dropped Anakin right now, he'd still have been one of the only outsiders to be invited into the Jedi temple.

"Shield your mind, I could," Yoda said slowly, "but stand up to intrusion by a trained sensitive, it could not."

Girth's brow furrowed a bit, looking marginally puzzled.

Master Xio took pity on him. "Shields can be placed on a mind, but those shields must be internally maintained to do the most good. Otherwise, it will be fairly easy, if somewhat time consuming, to break past said shields."

Something occurred to Anakin right then. He went to voice it, but then hesitated. Somehow he didn't think his suggestion would go over well... and he'd be the only one of the three who could conceivably do it.

"Would there be some kind of trigger that would let you know someone was trying to break through those shields?" Girth asked Yoda, looking somewhere between fascinated and sick to his stomach. At least Anakin thought so. He couldn't really see the drall's skin, except for around the lips. Those did look decidedly green.

"Yes, but too late, we may be, to stop any damage," Yoda warned.

They sat in silence while Girth debated with himself.

"Even if I found a clinic closer to the Temple? Would that help?" he finally asked, although he was beginning to sound defeated. Anakin hated hearing that from someone who had seemed so strong.

Then again, even the strong could be defeated.

No one answered Girth's question, and that was answer enough.

Finally, Anakin couldn't take it anymore.

"I have a suggestion," he said, hating how uncertain he sounded. "It would... help with placing defenses."

Xio suddenly looked worried at his tone and Yoda studied him intently. Nevertheless, he pushed on.

"I know a technique that would place a sort of illusion under any shield on his mind. If I'm careful enough, he – the intruder – may not even realize it is an illusion. It's an extra defense, very much like placing a maze under the shield that only a Force-sensitive can perceive. Even if an intruder does sense the illusion, it would take a great deal of time and effort to break through it."

"But a dark technique, it is," Yoda said, frowning ever so slightly. It was enough.

Anakin looked down. "Yes. I'm positive I can adapt it to the light, though," he insisted.

Girth put paws up to massage the sides of his head. "Is this something else that can only be explained if we can somehow find a way to protect the information you wish to give me?"

Anakin glanced at the other two who, in turn, glanced at each other. Under normal circumstances, no. In current circumstances and with everything Anakin had given away already, probably.

"For now, yes," Master Xio finally answered.

Girth just looked resigned.

"Hurt Healer Girth, will it?" Yoda asked.

Anakin shook his head. "Not unless I wish it." He noticed Yoda's gaze sharpen and Master Xio look just a little more worried. "And I don't," he added on, trying not to be offended. From their reactions, he doubted he succeeded.

Thankfully, the drall smiled at him. "I trust you, Anakin."

That stunned the former Sith. "You do? Why?"

Girth shrugged. "You've never given me a reason not to."

Anakin slumped a little. "That's because you don't know what I've done."

The mind-healer scrutinized him for several seconds. "Perhaps not. But all I have to go on are my experiences. I mean, I'd still like to know the particulars, but I don't see a reason not to go through with this. Besides, how can you learn to trust again if no one trusts you?"

The former Sith was positive Girth couldn't possibly understand how grateful he was to him at that moment.

"Thank you," he all but whispered.

"Touch the darkness, you will not?" Yoda insisted, although he looked far more welcoming that he had just a few moments before.

Anakin noted that as he shook his head, trying to convey his utter unwillingness to even contemplate the idea of doing so.

"How will it affect Healer Girth?" Master Xio asked.

"It shouldn't at all," Anakin responded, turning his attention to her. "The technique is specifically for sensitives. Non-sensitives can't be hurt or drawn in unless the caster specifically wishes it."

"Just to cover all of our bases, what are the chances that this technique will fail or not work how it is supposed to?" Girth asked. "If this is as dire as you are making it out to be, I don't want to be the reason why your attempts to hide information failed."

"With the shield only, it's more or less a guarantee that a skilled intruder would find the information they want," Anakin told him matter-of-factly. "With the illusionary maze under it, our chances at hiding the information would become exponentially better and it would give us more time to get to you should the need arise. If, for some reason, I cannot put the defense in place, we will know immediately."

The smaller sentient nodded. "Very well. And if I move closer to the Temple, upgrade my security, have a number of personal coms on me with emergency numbers as well as a few weapons at all times?Would that be an acceptable risk?" Anakin wanted to sigh. Weapons wouldn't help him against Sidious. They might, however, stop someone sent to kidnap the drall. Noting their hesitation, Girth added on, "Just until I

can finish with my current patients or slowly ease them over to someone else?"

Anakin and Yoda exchanged glances. Neither one of them really wanted to take the chance, but they did still have a little over a month before the Ambassador program started, and it would take a little bit of time after that for Sidious to really set his sights on anyone, Anakin or otherwise. This way, if they moved carefully enough, it wouldn't alert Sidious or raise immediate red flags. No giant, theoretical sign saying, 'Look over here! Someone we want to protect from you!'

"Saying, are you, that willing to move into the Temple eventually, you are?" Yoda asked carefully.

Girth looked at them and then at Anakin. "If I do not have to drop all of my other clients immediately, then yes, if we deem it necessary in the future."

Anakin was stunned. "Why?" he blurted out, mainly because he couldn't figure it out on his own. He wasn't *worth* that! There were other people who needed help too – other kids. Actual kids.

Girth thought about that for a moment. "Well, firstly, I do want to help you, Anakin," he smiled over at the former Sith and Anakin ducked his head, trying to ignore the warmth that came to him from those words. "Secondly, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me. Thirdly, I fear I'm already in too deep to really be safe," he shot a pointed look at all of the Jedi and Anakin raised his eyebrows. It seemed he may get more than the time-traveler had given him credit for. "I have a few other reasons, but those are the main ones."

"Hmm," Yoda said and nodded. Then he turned to a still recovering Anakin grimly. "Very well, allow you to do this, we will."

Chapter End Notes

AN: I'd like to thank Khalthar, Carradee and Darkon Fray for their help on this. *hug* Seriously, guys, couldn't do this without you.

So, I'm gonna be straight with you all. I've had this chapter done for a while, but going to post it almost gave me panic attacks and I HAVE NO IDEA WHY. *sigh* I'm still not a hundred percent sure. I've gotten so much support on this recently that... it's just phenomenal, and so I don't think the reviewers have anything to

do with the...reluctance to post this. I do think part of it is that I've decided to end this story after the next chapter after all and endings always kind of freak me out, so that's my running theory right now. Yes, I have the next chapter done. I just need to send it to all my betas.

Oh, one final reason why this took as long as it did, my friend and I have published a comic book/graphic novel. It's for teens and our first one, but I did all the artwork and am very proud of it. (I learned SO MUCH while doing this, I can't even...) If you want to check it out you can find more information on my tumblr: https://psudosisters.tumblr.com/.

Anyway, I apologize again for the wait. Hoping to get the final chapter up here soon. Luv and hugz!

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin didn't want to admit that he'd overlooked something. Here he had his hands on Girth's head and had already begun to draw on the Force, but the technique he'd proposed required a Force Trance. A fairly deep one at that.

Kriff.

He'd promised Girth that he would give him protection, though, and he refused to go back on his word. He'd just have to do what he could.

Ignoring his uneasiness, he reached out towards Girth's presence in the Force. Small as it was, every sentient had a presence in the Force, which is part of the reason why Anakin should, theoretically, be able to pull this off. It just wasn't a significant enough presence to set off the trap he was attempting to build.

Anakin? Girth asked and Anakin relaxed a little. At least they'd established a connection. That was a definite positive.

Yes, he responded.

Girth's presence rang with surprise, wariness and a little awe. *I can feel you in my mind.*

Anakin felt himself smile a bit. *Every being has some ability to feel the Force.* Although being able to speak to the drall like this suggested a bit more sensitivity. Obviously not enough to become a Jedi, but there seemed to be something more there. Then again, Force bonds had been built between sensitives and non-sensitives before. Anakin was just surprised it had happened so quickly. The bond in and of itself would be temporary, but the fact that it had happened at all was something Anakin would consider positive, if surprising.

Yes, I know... in theory, the drall responded slowly. *But this is still an entirely new experience for me.*

If Anakin hadn't been attempting a Force Trance, he would have laughed outright. *A little overwhelming?*

Girth's hesitation trickled over to him. *You can sense that?*

Anakin sent an affirmative.

I... see.

He was a little wary. Every sentient wanted some privacy regarding their inner thoughts. It wasn't an unusual reaction... at least, that's what Anakin told himself.

Don't worry. I'm just getting your superficial thoughts and feelings. I pray that is enough.

Confusion. *Why wouldn't it be?*

Anakin wanted to sigh. *Because old habits die hard. I have been having... difficulties entering a Force Trance deeply enough recently.*

He really tried not to take the insecurity from Girth personally. The drall was doing this for him, after all, allowing him in to place this trap.

Is there a reason for that?

In any other situation, Anakin would have raised an eyebrow in amusement. *Starting our session early?*

A sort of warm fondness and mild embarrassment.

Anakin decided to answer before the drall said – well, consciously thought – anything else.

I am used to a dark method of meditation that requires a focal point.

Puzzlement. *What kind of a focal point?*

Any negative emotion, preferably anger and rage, or hate.

More puzzlement. *And light meditation requires no focal point?*

Anakin nodded, knowing Girth would sense that.

And you are finding it difficult to bridge the gap between one and the other. It didn't sound like a question. *Have you tried to meditate using positive emotions as a focal point?*

This time Anakin frowned. *It is still a dark technique that encourages*

emotion.

Anakin, we've been going over how your emotions aren't a bad thing.

In this case, I disagree. Of course the mind-healer would pick up on his defensiveness.

The drall gave a mental sigh. *I've offended you. I apologize. It wasn't my intention. You obviously know a great deal more about this than I.*

Anakin felt his sincerity and relaxed a little. He could sense where he needed to begin to build the trap, but it was, unsurprisingly, eluding him.

It is forgotten, he replied, releasing the negative emotions to the Force. They fled and he was left with only his initial frustration. *In truth, I appreciate the suggestion. It is just that using emotion for a focal point like that is considered a bridge to the dark side.*

He could sense Girth's hesitation, but he could also sense how the drall felt what he thought needed to be said, so he braced himself and sent encouragement.

Hesitantly, Girth responded. *The thing about bridges is that they can be used both ways.*

Anakin hadn't really been expecting that, so he paused to think about it. He'd been having such difficulties... was the solution really that simple? The thought of focusing on positive emotions had crossed his mind before... but theoretically, any emotion could be linked to the dark. Right? His love for Padmé had been forefront at his mind when he'd considered it before.

But then, his love for his children... how could that ever possibly be dark if it had inspired him to come back to the light? If it had saved him then, could it save – or at least *help* – him now?

He sat there, frozen, for several seconds revisiting each argument multiple time before finally coming to a conclusion.

Very well, he thought, hesitantly, *I will try.*

It still took him a few minutes to steady himself. Then he thought of Luke and his brightness in the Force; of the peace and tranquility his son represented. He focused on those memories, let them fill his entire being as he had with the hate and anger as Vader. He let his will and

intent carry him and then lost himself to the Force.

He didn't know how long it took him to finish, but when he finally came back to himself, he realized that he'd managed to achieve a trance far deeper than anything he'd been able to do since he came back. The trap now fit snugly in place and, as he inspected it, he couldn't help but be impressed. He almost didn't believe that he'd created it.

When he finally opened his eyes, he noticed the two masters watching him intently.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"Almost two hours," Master Xio replied.

He blinked. That long? "Oh."

Beside him, Girth was just coming to himself as well.

"Incredible," he muttered. "I never could have imagined... I... " he blinked his round eyes several times before turning his twitching nose towards the Jedi. "Is that what you constantly feel?"

"Undoubtedly not," Anakin replied, only slightly sheepish.

Then Girth frowned at him. "I saw you, though, but you weren't you. You were... older. You had children."

Anakin shifted nervously and glanced over to Yoda and Xio, both of whom nodded encouragingly.

"Well, yes. You see, that is the secret we must protect at all costs; I'm from the future."

xXx

Girth could just hear his mentor's scolding voice. *Strange things happen when you get involved with Jedi.* His teacher hadn't been their biggest fan, although Girth could never tell why.

Now, he thought he understood somewhat. Because, seriously, *time travel*? Anakin was actually a 47 (or 48, he hadn't been completely sure)-year-old man shoved into a 10-year-old's body. Just *how* was he supposed to treat that?! That was *on top* of the fact that Chancellor Palpatine was a psychopathic Sith Lord. Girth still didn't quite understand the difference between Sith and Jedi, but he had enough

of a grasp to realize just how bad this all was. And Anakin was supposed to go in and actually interact with his abuser, even if said abuser didn't know anything about him right now.

Girth didn't think that his life could get any more surreal or the situation any more convoluted. It just... went beyond anything he could possibly imagine.

After they'd discussed everything for a little while, Anakin had been sent off to dinner with Master Yoda while the Jedi mind-healer and Girth had talked. Master Xio had admitted that she felt equally out of her depth, which did help him feel a little better. He wasn't the only one having issues here. At least this wasn't a 'common' thing in the Jedi Order. Apparently, they'd had no actual records of it happening before.

Still, he and Master Xio had gone over their notes together and worked out a basic plan.

The moment he got home, he utilized the extra funds the Jedi Temple had forwarded him and called for an upgrade in his security as well as a few body guards. Somehow he still didn't think that would be enough, but it would have to do until he could safely hand his clients off and take refuge in the Jedi Temple.

Well, his teacher had been right in the fact that strange things really did happen around Jedi. He just hadn't realized *how* strange.

xXx

"So, what brings you up to visit me?" Siri asked as Anakin walked through the doorway of her healer's room, ignoring how, yet again, the sterile smell brought up bad memories. At least none of them were Vader era. He hadn't had the ability to smell at all then.

He raised an eyebrow at her in dry humor. "I hear you are being released."

She rolled her eyes. "Finally."

Anakin nodded. He could definitely understand her desire to leave. He hat... er, rather disliked the healer's wing himself.

"But that isn't why you're here," Siri said, cocking her head at him. Funny, she seemed far more open than she'd been towards him since they'd come back.

He took a seat in the chair in front of her bed. "I... just finished with another mind-healing session. We decided to erect a shield around Healer Girth's mind so he could have an extended time period to finish with his current patients."

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Anakin didn't answer for a moment. When he did, his voice came out quiet, almost a whisper. "He's willing to give up so much for me. I... don't understand why."

Somehow, he felt her sadden. "I'm just beginning to understand that that's because you've never seen yourself as a person of worth. Not really. Have you?"

His hands, resting on his knees, clenched, wrinkling the fabric under his palms. He didn't answer, but she was right, he supposed. He'd grown up a slave. Albeit he'd been allowed to grow up with far more of a sense of self than many – most – other slaves he'd known, but the idea that he was only worth the results of his actions had always been his base mind set. It was why he'd always felt so inadequate and why he'd always strived to accomplish the impossible; that's what would make him worthy in his 'master's' eyes (whether they be slaver, Jedi or Sith) and thus his own eyes.

Only now was he really beginning to see that freeborn mentality – the very base for their thought processes – was entirely different. He wasn't even sure *how* yet (at least not to the full extent), except that they saw themselves, and everyone around them, as having an inherent worth simply because they *exist*. It was a... foreign concept to Anakin. Even when he'd risked so much to save others he'd never previously met during the Clone Wars, he'd done so with the idea that if he saved them, he would be useful and worth while.

How selfish was that?

Selfish and worthless. Somehow that described the entirety of his thought process for ninety-percent of his life. Except when he'd been around Padmé... Which, really, explained so much.

"Perhaps not," he finally conceded aloud, his voice quiet.

Siri sighed. "I'm sure you've thought this a million times before, but I wish you hadn't been born a slave. Or that the Jedi had found you sooner."

Anakin snorted. "Perhaps it would have been better had the Jedi not found me at all." Since they were playing that game.

The blond girl's eyebrows furrowed as she turned to him. "Do you really mean that?"

They sat in a heavy silence for a few seconds before Anakin sighed. "I truly do not know. I suppose it would not have been better for myself, but the galaxy in general could have been spared a lot of death and pain."

"Maybe," Siri responded, her own tone now matching Anakin's. "But whether you were found or not, Palpatine would have still gotten into power and initiated the Clone Wars. He would have just found another person to corrupt. Besides, you do know it could have been much worse, right?"

The former Sith openly scoffed at that. "Pray tell, how?"

The look she shot him could have sucked water from the air. "Off the top of my head? You could have been separated from you mother at a young age, sent to work in a pleasure house, or – worst of all – you could have been found by Maul."

Anakin blinked at her for several seconds as the implications came crashing down. The first two would have been terrible. The latter though... somehow, he'd never really considered that. In that case, if he'd been lucky, Maul would have merely stolen him. It wouldn't have been too difficult to get the slave-chip controller from Watto. If he'd been unlucky, Maul would have taken his mother too and most likely tortured her in front of Anakin to get him to hate. It would have been so easy. And if that had happened, he wouldn't have had anything even *remotely* approaching a healthy outlook to compare his life to. Currently he may still consider himself a slave (well, he still thought like one), but at least he had positive experiences about freeborn people and their mentality. The universe would have been bleak indeed if he, the 'Chosen One', had been raised in such a way.

The very thought almost caused him to be sick.

"I concede the point," he muttered.

Siri nodded. "Good. We can wish all we like, but I suppose it's the will of the Force that you were found when you were."

He frowned as a thought occurred to him. He didn't seem to notice

how he curled up on himself ever so slightly. "Perhaps... I was never meant to be light."

Siri's worry and wariness spiked. "What does that have to do with the price of tea on Alderaan?! That's not what I meant! What brought that on?"

He took a deep breath. "I've been speaking with Dooku."

She blinked, staring at him with a blank face, uncomprehending. "Excuse me?"

Anakin licked his lips, realizing too late that he should have, perhaps, found a way to break that one more gently. "I've been in disguise, and I cannot think he will conceivably be able to identify me. Please trust that I've been extremely careful in this, risky as the venture was. My intention was to educate him as to what the dark side and," he glanced around, feeling for any presences who could overhear. Eventually, he felt it safe enough to go on because he continued. "To educate him as to what the dark side and Sidious would do to him if he chose to fall."

From her expression, Siri didn't like where this was going. Good. At least she'd understand the seriousness of the situation. "What was his reaction? Did you get to him in time?"

"He hasn't fallen yet, if that is what you mean," Anakin said with a sigh.

"'Yet'?"

The former Sith looked down. "I told him everything I could without telling him about my – our – origins. I warned him, explained it all to him. I initially wanted to rob Palpatine of a resource, but I believe I may have gotten too invested. I wanted to save him, Siri." He sighed. "Despite my efforts, he just informed me that he is going to join Sidious."

Siri closed her eyes, as if having an unpleasant guess confirmed.

"He wants to do so to help me destroy him," Anakin continued.

"What?" the older Jedi almost shrieked, reigning herself in at the last moment. Well, at least her control was beginning to return. "Does he have any idea how stupid that is?"

"I told him it was a bad idea. He said he was positive he could have

Sidious' secrets in under a year. I told him it was wishful thinking. He thinks he can resist the call of the dark side now that he's more prepared. I told him he doesn't understand... ." Anakin shook his head. "Perhaps he is destined to fall as well. And if he is, then... "

"Poodoo," Siri said angrily. Anakin looked up at her wryly. "I see where this is going," she continued. "You think that since he chose to go down that path again that you are 'destined' to do so as well." She leaned forward, "his choices aren't yours, Anakin Skywalker."

He shook his head. "I never said they were."

Her lips thinned. "And yet you're taking this – admittedly very possible – fall of his as a sign that you, too, have some sort of fate? You're letting his choices affect your own. Don't deny it."

Anakin frowned. "I was merely postulating that we – he and I mainly – may have certain destinies in the Force."

Siri's eyes narrowed. "Sounds like a self-fulfilling prophecy to me."

"That was not what I meant."

"Which is why I pointed it out."

The former Sith shook his head. "What if it is my destiny, though?"

She sighed and crossed her arms. "So what if it is? Or was? Have you ever considered that if it was your destiny to fall, that it was also always your destiny to come back?"

He blinked in surprise as he contemplated that. He'd never really thought about it in that way before.

"Besides, we already have contingencies for if you fall again and decide, for whatever reason, to not come back." It was her turn to look down. "I'll find a way to stop you, Anakin. I promise."

Again, silence fell over the room, except for the monitoring equipment. Somehow, though, Anakin couldn't help but feel grateful, and far more confident than he had when he'd decided to come. He'd initially come to warn her about everything, but now he felt infinitely better about the whole situation.

Even if Dooku did fall again, they'd just figure that into their plans and act accordingly.

He smiled. The expression was becoming more and more familiar, and he rather liked that realization.

"Thank you, Knight Tachi."

She glanced over at him, a small smile of her own gracing her face. "Anytime, Skywalker."

He perked up even more. It had been a while since she'd called him that. Somehow she'd managed to initially turn his last name into a term of endearment, and he hadn't heard her call him that since they'd returned.

"Now," she continued, sitting up on her bed, "let's discuss training for once I'm released. We have to be ready for anything, right?"

"Indeed," Anakin replied.

xXx

It had been a long time indeed since Palpatine had been required to come up with *so many* contingency plans. Even longer since he'd had to *implement* such a majority.

And it all led back to Darth Vader. He was the one who had (inadvertently or not) saved Amidala. He was the one who had been so blasted elusive. He was the one who had sent this 'Luke Lars' to talk Dooku out of joining Sidious. The Chancellor had come to the conclusion that he'd done so to stop Sidious' plans, and it had very nearly worked.

Palpatine smiled to himself though as he stared out the office window of the Chancellor's suite. Vader's plans may have almost worked, but he hadn't succeeded. Dooku may not be entirely on Sidious' side yet, but it was only a matter of time. The former Jedi wasn't stupid by any means, and he would come around.

The politician was beginning to wonder just how intelligent this 'Vader' really was. Would he even be worth trying to tame?

Well, either way, he could at least advance with his plans now. The clone army would be built and pieces put into place for the eventual galactic war.

It would all come together if he were just patient... and he had very nearly perfected the art of patience. Soon, the galaxy would be his and

once he found Vader, no one would be left to stop him.

END PART 1

XxX

Chapter End Notes

IMPORTANT AUTHOR'S NOTE: And that's a wrap! Done with part one! So, here's what will happen after this:

1. For those of you who don't know, there will be at least 2 one shots and one more full-length story that should wrap up this arc. The full-length story should have a lot more action as there's going to be Sidious/Vader interaction and Palpatine/Anakin interaction and Dooku will come into play and lots of Force visions and Obi-wan and... yeah. Anyway, the stories to watch out for: Sharing Outsight, The Warmth of Resight, and The Inevitability of Oversight. Yes, I have already started working on them. No, I don't know when they'll get up. I think it's kind of hopeful to theorize that I'll get this done within the next year, but one can hope, right?

2. Thank you to everyone who found me Amazon and supported me! It's under Els Curtis if you want to look for us (I did the artwork for all of the books there).

3. I have had no less than 8 consistent beta readers for this fic and probably 3 times that many at any given point... I just... THANK YOU SO MUCH. My beta readers are really... I just... You know who you are, and I cannot thank you enough. I just... can't. *hug*

4. A huge shout out to everyone who has read this and sent feedback. Even if I don't agree with you, I do appreciate your thoughts. It does help me improve as a writer, and so, well, just... thank you. I have more than 2,000 kudos and more than 500 bookmarks, and over 50,000 hits (and that's just the story alone, not those people who follow me as an author or the 'Hindsight' series itself) and it honestly just blows my mind. I'd always just resigned myself to being one of those small-time authors that had strange enough ideas that people found it amusing, but usually just bypassed for other authors. You know, one of those people sitting in the corner smiling and waving as people pass. LOL So the fact that this has had so many people support it... I've had my

issues, true, and a few people have been annoying, but for the most part I get good thoughts and real feedback. It is greatly appreciated.

5. Now that I've figured out why I had issues with the story and posting it (yes, I've looked into it and it has been addressed) I'm back to actually answering people who review. If you've sent me a nice, long review and I haven't responded, know I read them. I love them. I just had issues even thinking about the story without going into a panic for a while there. Now that I'm mostly over that, I'd be happy to discuss anything with you guys, and I apologize for not having responded before.

Look for my next story, Sharing Outsight, soon. I hope. *crosses fingers*

Final AN -- Sequel Up!

Chapter Summary

Final FYI because I was asked to.

An FYI letting you know that I've posted 3 new sequels to this! Links below!

Sharing Outsight -- https://archiveofourown.org/works/14423157 (Second chapter to come)

The Warmth of Resight -- https://archiveofourown.org/works/14754002

The Inevitability of Oversight -- https://archiveofourown.org/works/15273888

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!